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"WHY, MISS ATTISON, YOU HAVE COME TO GRIEF!"

Pledged to Marry; or, In Love's Bonds.

BY SARA CLAXTON.

CHAPTER I.

MY LADY'S MATCHMAKING.

"AUBREY, it is perfect lunacy!" said my lady.

"I thought it would seem so to you, dear," her cousin sorrowfully replied.

"To tell me you consider yourself engaged to a man you have never seen, and of whose existence you were ignorant until asked to promise

to marry him! It is worse than lunacy. Uncle could not have been in his senses (people very seldom are on their death-beds) when he asked you to promise it. Why on earth should he want you to marry this stranger?"

"Alberta, I think I will tell you," said Aubrey, drawing nearer her chair, and raising her tearful, dark eyes. "Papa, years ago, did this stranger's father, Mr. Grey, great injury—cheated him—the sad voice got bravely over the ugly word—"of wealth that should have been his, and, through him, that of the girl he was about to marry. His poverty frightened her, and she discarded her lover. On his death-bed papa was troubled by remorse for those miserable remembrances, and could not die, Alberta, until he had made what atonement there was left to him to make—not to the man he had wronged (Mr. Grey

himself had died years before), but to his son."

"Very right and proper, if the atonement had confined itself to the restitution of the ill-gotten money."

Aubrey winced.

"There was that other wrong to be compensated; at least, I know there was in papa's mind (partly that, and partly fear of my poverty when he made the will that bequeathed his whole property to Philip Grey, on the one condition that he married me.)"

"A pretty condition! Supposing he had been already married?"

"Then the property was to be equally divided between us."

"Oh, really! And supposing Mr. Grey refuses the one condition—likes the money, and objects to you?"

"He forfeits it, and I keep it."

"And if you refuse?"

"Every penny goes to him," announced Miss Attison, calmly.

"Uncle was out of his senses," my lady declared, indignantly, "to throw his only daughter at the head of a needy stranger in that way. How in the world you, with your overstrained ideas of modesty and retirement, could consent to such an outrageous disposal of yourself is past my imagination, I confess."

"Papa implored me to comfort his last moments by my promise to carry out his wishes," said Aubrey, with a break in her voice and her head turned away. "It was the first request he ever made to me, and he never denied me anything. Alberta, in my place, you would have done as I did."

My lady shrugged her graceful shoulders, too annoyed for sympathy.

"How is it you've never told me a word of all this until to-day—nearly a year since uncle's death?"

"Because only to-day have I heard that the solicitor, Mr. Robins, has discovered Philip Grey. He might have been married or dead, as you know; in which case I should have had nothing to tell you. Mr. Grey went out to Australia after his losses here, and his son is living there now. There has been a good deal of delay in finding him. Lawyers are very slow, I think; and his whereabouts was utterly vague. But my letter this morning tells me that Mr. Robins has communicated with him at last, and has forwarded the letters left in his (Mr. Robins's) hands. One papa wrote himself; the other I wrote at papa's dictation."

"Making an obliging offer of yourself! No fear but that the man will snap you up! Well, I'm sorry for you, Aubrey, and wish uncle's repentance had taken another form, or been delayed a little longer."

"Alberta!"

My lady smiled at the flash of the dove-like eyes.

"That expression suits you, dear. You will be sorry for yourself, some day, when you have sunk to the level of your clod-hopping spouse, and are enjoying the fullest delights of bush life and squatters' (or whatever they are) vulgarity. Sorry, when you know the value of the beauty and refinement you are so madly determined to throw away. And I had such charming plans for you, Aubrey; had sketched out a matrimonial future you could so easily have realized this autumn. I thought—as you are the only creature I care a straw about—I should like to have you settled near me for life."

"The only creature you care a straw about, and you are married!" Aubrey echoed, shocked.

My lady laughed; and, rising, trailed her velvet across to her cousin's side.

"You are not stupid enough to fancy I care for Sir Edgar, are you? At least, I do care for him in a certain way; I care for his rent-roll and title, friends, position, and surroundings generally. I merely object to his pomposity, ugliness, jealousy, and himself particularly."

Aubrey put her hands to her ears. "I will

not listen to you, Alberta. You are saying what you do not mean."

My lady looked much amused.

"I don't tell *him* quite that story, you know; but I like to be candid occasionally, and it is only with you I can indulge in so dangerous a luxury; you always seem exactly my second self."

She looked it, too—for they were marvelously alike, those cousins, standing side by side on the fleecy rug.

Taken for sisters were they over and over again, and had been remarked as twins, though there were plenty of points of dissimilarity visible to any close observer.

It was the style and general *tout ensemble* that was so strikingly alike. My lady was the handsomer of the two. Her beauty was perfect as a Grecian statue's, and no marble perfection could be colder.

The chiseled features and creamy skin suggested no touch of warmth; and the eyes, in their dark velvet loveliness, might flash, and lure, and dazzle, but could never soften in tenderness nor kindle in sympathy, as it was the nature of Aubrey's to do.

Miss Attison was slighter, shorter, altogether a less fine, although as graceful a woman as her cousin.

Her complexion, too, was less perfect, though it had warmer coloring, and the expression of the two faces was utterly unlike; for there was haughty impenetrability in my lady, there was winning sweetness in Aubrey.

Still, there was a wonderful likeness, not only in feature, but in richness of auburn hair, in the proud carriage of the head, and in general style and manner; and Aubrey often laughingly declared it was no use having separate photographs, for that it only led to the confusion of well-regulated albums.

"Our first installment of visitors to-morrow," observed Lady Perriman, complacently, sipping her five o'clock tea; "and a matter of real rejoicing, I think it. Amiable as you are, Aubrey, and exhilarating as Edgar's society is, I should die if another week were to be as the last has been."

"Are there many people coming?" asked Miss Attison.

"They will come till the house is crammed, I hope. Oh! to-morrow, you mean? Well, the only individual of note is the one I had determined to try my hand at match-making on for you—Max Lydell; his place is only three miles from here."

"Why on earth is he going to stop in this house, if his own is so near?"

"Because his own is undergoing alterations; and because I—knowing nothing of this idiotic engagement of yours—deemed a month together in a house under my supervision would be the only thing required to assist destiny, for you and he were made for each other. Oh, Aubrey! I could shake you!"

Whereupon Miss Attison laughed.

There were several ladies in elegant, and one or two gentlemen in regulation, evening costume, grouped stiffly about the Perriman drawing-room, when Max Lydell entered it.

His hostess, dazzling in black velvet and diamonds, made much of him; and when dinner was announced, Miss Attison was assigned to his care.

They were introduced as strangers, those two, or Aubrey's quick glance might have been taken for one of displeased recognition.

She was very lovely in black lace and snowdrops, with pearls coiled among the ruddy masses twined about her head; but for chilliness and reserve, Lydell thinks he has never encountered her equal.

"Uncommonly difficult to get on with," he voted her, feeling more than inclined to give up the attempt.

Feminine coldness or indifference is new experience to him, for although far from what is termed a lady's man, ladylike appreciation did, as a rule, find something unquestionably attractive in the dark, refined face, with its grave eyes and rare charm of smile; still more

so, perhaps, in the languid, easy manner out of which, as from a contrasting frame, came at times such stirring bursts of eloquence, satire in keenest darts, or a power of subtly annihilating argument which proved the brains behind the quiet, unreadable eyes to be of no meaner caliber than the close-cut silk that covers them.

However, on second thoughts, Lydell rather exerted himself to be pleasant to this unapproachable neighbor of his; and although, when she had glided away with the other ladies, he could not congratulate himself on the least success, he was not altogether certain that it might not be worth his while to try again to soften her.

He considered the matter as he followed his majestic host from dining to drawing-room again, and saw Aubrey seated in one of the low, luxurious chairs in which my lady delights, with her pretty hands clasped on its arm, and her eyes upturned to the black coat and diamond studs before her. Several other black coats and variously designed studs were dancing attendance, eager to enter the arena should the chance present itself. Lydell preferred monopoly.

Aubrey's hair was just touching the dark velvet of the chair, and a lamp's light caught its rare red tint; there was cobwebby lace around her throat, and grace in her attitude.

Lydell entered into a political discussion with an opposite neighbor at the dinner-table, gradually defeated his occupant, and watched Miss Attison all the while.

Smiles and dimples suited her better than stiffness and disdain. She laughed out merrily once or twice, and her blue eyes sparkled and color variegated.

Lydell joined the outer circle of that velvet chair. Its occupant was talking brilliantly and well, with a quick repartee here, a clever remark there, and sound common sense in the next observation, all uttered in the same musical unraised tones. If there were a thing Lydell hated, it was a high-pitched voice in a woman.

"Aubrey, play something!" her ladyship begged; and Max Lydell found himself adjusting the piano-stool and candles. Miss Attison did not play as well as she talked; hers was but a mediocre performance, breaking the instrument's ice, and showing greater talent the way it should go; but it spirited her from the low seat, upon which a watching old lady, with an eye for comfort, pounced.

"Amiability rewarded after the customary manner of this world," Mr. Lydell observed, with a smiling glance from the lost chair to the stiff ottoman to which the girl was trying to resign herself.

"I don't know about the amiability, but I dare say there was a little selfishness in monopolizing so desirable a seat so long."

She turned to him, with no trace of the dimples flashing out a moment after upon a sandy-haired specimen of gallantry making haste to aver, in a strong Irish brogue, "that no one who knew Miss Attison but so slightly as he had the misfortune to do could credit, even from her own lips, the accusation of selfishness, or, indeed, of any other quality that might not be defined as charming." And Lydell's lip curled.

"Barefaced flattery is the style that pleases thee," he said, scornfully, to himself. Then aloud, "May I, though possessed of discernment so infinitely less profound than Major Macarthy's, be permitted to second that declaration?"

Aubrey looked up at him, steadily, straight, and, before the clear, contemptuous gaze, he, the first time in his life, felt convicted of unprovoked impertinence.

Not so entirely unprovoked, though, as he noted how the bright friendliness and frank smiles so impartially bestowed on others were denied to himself alone. How her very voice changed to address him, and how carefully she avoided even a chance encounter of his glance. To say that he was piqued would be to put it too mildly.

"I will find out the reason of the fair demoiselle's caprice, or conquer it," was the resolution with which he knocked out the ashes of his last pipe in the smoking-room that night.

"I congratulate you on your taste," said my lady, satirically, when Aubrey, according to custom, entered her dressing-room for an ostensible good-night, but a real ten minutes' gossip over the concluded evening.

"Thanks, dear," returned the girl, provokingly.

"Pretty taste, indeed, to snub the nicest fellow by encouraging the greatest cad in the room!"

"Oh, poor Major Macarty! he is not a cad."

"A nuisance, then. I believe you did it just to annoy me."

"You believe nothing of the sort," Aubrey contradicted. "I tried to snub Mr. Lydell (and I am glad you think I succeeded) simply because, from the bottom of my heart, I detest him."

My lady elevated her eyebrows, and waited.

"I'll tell you all about it, Alberta." And Miss Attison placed her slippers feet on the fender, and leaned confidentially forward.

"A little time ago, aunt and I were coming out of the Albert Hall—along those endless corridors, you know. We were walking slowly, all muffled up, and two gentlemen passed us so closely that it was impossible to avoid hearing a little of their conversation, especially as they scorned to lower their tones. Distinctly I heard one say, with a laugh, 'Nailed you will be, old fellow, within six months! The pretty little Attison spends the autumn with her cousin, and I'll lay any odds that she knocks you over as easily as her ladyship did that old stick, Perriman!'

"Even more distinctly did I hear the answer to that pleasing speech.

"I have too much pity for the shallowness of your purse to take your bet. Granted the young lady's charms, I tell you candidly the first decent flower-girl we meet would make in my eyes a far more desirable wife than the lovely Miss Attison!"

"As he uttered my name, he passed out into the full light, and I looked at him; and to-day I recognized him the moment he entered the drawing-room, and remembered his insult."

"Oh, you made a mistake! Identifying a man in a moment's glance like that—muffled up, too! Absurd!"

"It was I who was muffled—not he, Alberta. And if I had not seen the face, I could swear to the voice."

"There was no insult about it that I can see." My lady changed her tactics. "Listeners never hear good of themselves, and young men of the present day don't pick and choose their expressions with the circumspection their friends could wish. Besides, granting those to be his true sentiments of the moment, they only proved that he knew nothing at all about you, or that it was a case of sour grapes, and it would be a very interesting occupation for you now to compel him to recant or repent those sentiments."

"Do you think I would deign—"

"There, good-night, dear," concluded Lady Perriman, with a yawn; "and forget this thrilling anecdote."

CHAPTER II.

FROST AND THAW.

THERE was a dance at the Hall the second evening after Max Lydell's arrival. A good many of the young people of the neighborhood were invited to come up after dinner. Fairly good musicians were provided, and without much ceremony or preparation a most enjoyable evening came off.

Lady Perriman affected such impromptu gatherings. She liked dancing for the same reason that she liked or disliked anything—viz., her own ability or inability to shine therein. She was the belle, of course, this evening, Aubrey being second, in white silk and black lace; but greatly in request as this latter young lady

was, and beautifully as she danced, she could not bestow her own gift upon her partners.

"These dreadful, floundering countrymen!" she sighed, slowly recovering from a hardy-hit young squire's *trois temps*. "I wish I could dance with Alberta; there isn't another decent step in the room. Yes, she has found one," as her ladyship's silken skirts float by, steered smoothly and truly through the jogging and hopping, dashing and charging maze with which the room is filled; and then Aubrey's envious eyes recognized her cousin's partner, and she resolved that her own waltzing was at an end for that evening.

She would not be bumped about, as those other men styled dancing, before Max Lydell's quiet, supercilious watching.

Major Macarthy pleaded for a galop; the smitten young Squire implored one valse; and the doctor *par excellence* of the neighborhood could not realize a mazourka refused; but pretty Miss Attison was firm.

She kept Major, and Squire, and doctor beside her; for it was no part of her programme to act the deserted wallflower, and she smiled and listened to each in turn, conscious the while of Alberta's mauve train and musical laugh passing and repassing, and of the darkly handsome face bending over her cousin's sunny hair—curiously conscious, too, of the exact expression that face is wearing, and how seldom its glance is turned upon herself.

"Have you and my cousin danced together yet?" asked my lady of Mr. Lydell, as the music struck up. "Oh, Aubrey, take one turn! Your steps will match exactly. He is such a relief after the aborigines," she laughed in her cousin's ear, and glided away.

"May I have the pleasure?" inquired Lydell.

How could he say less?

"You must really excuse me. I am too tired."

"For just one turn?"

"Certainly."

He stood there, still apparently waiting; and as Aubrey turned her attention pointedly toward the doctor, she was conscious that Lydell's dark eyes were still resting on her face. As the consciousness grew unbearable, she flashed round to meet them haughtily.

"For the last time of asking, Miss Attison," he laughed. And the girl a moment after knew not what had prompted her, whether the magnetism of the steady gaze, or the irresistible strains of the weird "Manolo;" but certain it was that in the very faces of the rejected valse, galop, and mazourka aspirants, she had laid her hand on their rival's shoulder, surrendered her other to his close, warm clasp, and from among them floated away.

Only one turn had Aubrey tacitly granted, but after the partners she has struggled with, and the music she has stood inactively listening to, the pleasure of a step even as her own, and a guidance as safe as smooth, was more than she could relinquish the moment it has begun.

Only when the long-played valse ended with a crash did Aubrey reluctantly pause at the opposite end of the room to where still stood and glared the Major, the Squire, and the doctor.

"There are upbraidings, stern, pathetic, and argumentative, awaiting you; no doubt about it," laughed Lydell, with a glance across.

"They all dance so fearfully bad," she murmured, self-excusingly; "the Major clearing the room like a cavalry charge; Mr. Donnington maintaining his own rights, irrespective of any other unfortunate couple's; and Mr. Landon—well, he might not be so bad if he had an idea of time or tune. Still, I think I must go across and make my peace with them if I can, for they are all great friends of mine *out of a ball-room*."

"I see. You like friendship with variations, and by a division of your friends into distinct circles for separate uses, prevent all the monotony attaching to the thing as generally understood. So many dancing friends, so many for flirting, such a number for town,

and such a number for country, etc. A very good plan, I have no doubt, provided that each favored individual knows his own place, and never presumes out of it, nor interferes with his neighbors. But, of course, you arrange all that?"

The keen sarcasm of the tone flushed Aubrey's face, as she looked up and smiled.

"I must compliment you as you complimented Major Macarthy last evening," she said, "upon the profundity of your discernment; and, of course, it is easy for you now to understand how I can find pleasure in dancing, say, with a man for whom, socially, I may entertain the greatest aversion."

"How pleasantly you put it!" he said, admiringly. Then, after a pause, "You learned dancing in Germany, if I may judge from your step?"

"I was educated there. Were you?"

"Not educated, but I have had a good deal of practice at one time or another in the Fatherland. Heavy and clumsy as those Teutons are, they can *dance*, can't they?" And loitering still at the further end of the room, but hidden by forming Lancers from those irate and ill-treated medical and martial eyes, Aubrey insensibly found herself drifting into amicable conversation under the guise of Continental discussion.

Supper assuaged Mr. Donnington's wounded feelings, while a quadrille was a sop in the pan to one, and a pretty speech to the other, of his companions in neglect; but, somehow or other, it happened also that before the evening had worn itself out, Miss Attison and Mr. Lydell had danced again, and more than once, together.

"I have a plan for you all to-day," announced my lady, a few mornings subsequently. "Those who please may ride, and those who please may walk; but no truancy will be allowed on any pretext whatever. My own opinion is that the walkers will have the best of it this lovely day, and they will be allowed to return by train."

"From where?" cried a chorus of eager voices.

"From the curious old hermitage in Hound Wood; a grotto thronged with legends and thrilling romances, and inhabited by a living hermit of the nineteenth century, to be seen and spoken with."

Of course there arose delight and anticipation; and whoever failed to anticipate delight must nevertheless go forth in search of it, for Sir Edgar was spending the day in town, and his lady's will reigned law.

Perriman Hall was filling as its mistress wished, and it was a goodly party that sallied forth on the healthy, exhilarating walk over the heather and through the woods.

No one rode, for the bridle-path was uncertain—moreover, longer.

Luncheon was conveyed by the Hall servants, and spread in the room which the hermit, in his own solitude, thoughtfully provided for such public requirements.

It was a merry meal, done justice to; and then followed the interviewing of the oracle, and many truisms uttered in solemnity, with a few carefully guarded predictions that could offend no one and ran no risk of ever proving themselves false, but which took so long to declare, that when some one by chance exclaimed, "What time does our train go?" the people who knew were astonished to find that there was barely time to catch it; and as it was the only train that could help them on their homeward way, there set in a general rush toward the little country station.

It was twenty minutes' walk there by the proper road; ten by a fly and a scramble over fields and gaps. A mad race, with the fleetest runners ahead to stop the train.

And not one of Aubrey's admirers was near—an effect of wholesale snubbing for which she had herself to thank—when she caught her flounces in some unseen wire netting, and each effort she made to free herself rendered her but the closer prisoner.

PLEDGED TO MARRY.

"Pull, dear! Make haste!" articulated Miss Ley, straining every nerve after a certain brown coat ahead.

"Oh, tear your dress, Aubrey. You'll never get it undone without," advised my lady, gliding past with a captain of hussars in indefatigable attendance.

But good strong serge is little less substantial than wire, and Aubrey tried as vainly to tear the one as the other. To strip her dress of its multitudinous frills would certainly be a work of time; but the girl began it bravely, and had demolished a yard or two by the time the train-catchers' voices grew inaudible.

"Can I be of any assistance?" inquired a cool, unexpected voice from behind.

"You'll certainly lose your train," was Miss Attison's not irrelevant reply.

"I never intended otherwise, though I must say my chance of catching it seems as good as your own at present," he rejoined, and smiled.

"Have you a knife? Will you cut it Quick?"

Lydell drew out the useful weapon in provoking hesitation.

"Isn't it a pity?"

The shrill railway whistle came clear on the breeze, and Aubrey's foot stamped.

"Will you let me be the judge of that, and simply do as you are asked?"

Without another word he drew the blade sharply across and across, and as the pretty kiltings lay wrecked on the ground, she was away like an arrow from a bow, breathlessly running, when again the fatal whistle sounded.

"Too late, Miss Attison. That wholesale destruction was useless," said the young man coolly at her side.

"That may not be the train, or the others may not all have caught it," she urged; but, alas! they reached the platform only to find it deserted—not one companion in misfortune visible.

"I am very sorry for you," observed Lydell, forgivingly. "I always intended walking back myself, but you will be so fearfully tired, I'm afraid."

"I shall not be tired in the least. It is not the distance I mind."

"But the company," he rejoined, equably; "which, I fear, is as inevitable as the walk. Unless," as if struck by a sudden idea, "we march apart at a certain regulation distance—say just beyond sight or just within hail—which will render you still under my protection, but relieved—"

"Don't tax your inventive powers any further," she interrupted, coldly, "unless they can suggest something more useful than nonsense."

For some time they walked on, those two figures, in a rigid silence, side by side. Aubrey's eyes were riveted on the ground; her companion's as persistently upon herself; and in spite of the unprovoked rudenesses he had winced under and resented, he could not help that glance from gradually growing an approving one.

The tall, lithe figure his own towered above was so easily graceful; the clear-cut profile had so rare a background in the tint of that massed hair; while the soft, downcast eyes and sweet pressed-together red lips seemed to contradict even his own practical experience, and give the lie to the looks and words that were sharper than blows.

As the silence grew marked, they reached the stile leading into the wood; and, while helping his companion over, Lydell made some slight remark about English country life, and, the barrier once skilfully removed, kept the conversation as persistently afloat.

Aubrey was difficult at first—taciturn and uninterested; but imperceptibly by and by the rare charm of manner—Lydell's own when he chose—told upon her in spite of herself.

He could be a brilliant conversationalist—a most fascinating one when he pleased. Gifted with easy command and perfect choice of language, vivid powers of descriptive memory and imagination, light glancing satire—he ex-

erted each and all in that afternoon walk over the thick-strewn leaves, and soon saw the spell work.

From monosyllables Aubrey deigned questions, and the next transition was easy. By the time they entered the home plantation, and the girl stifled an exclamation of surprise at the apparent shortness of the walk, Max Lydell had known her as society generally found her—bright, sympathetic, winning. As she really was, no mere acquaintance ever knew her.

The hidden depths of the character, Lydell's penetration told him, was no common one; its truth unswerving, honor steadfast, unselfishness, faith and devotion he had yet to gauge.

As they entered the Hall door, Aubrey froze again. From behind the heavy curtains cutting off the entrance from the further hall proceeded the chinking of cups and the laughing chatter of tea-drinkers; and my lady's voice cried sweetly, "Don't go up-stairs, Aubrey. Come and have some tea, dear child; you must be exhausted."

"We had not one of us an *idea* you were not in the train," observed vivacious Miss Ley. "We imagined you were with the others; the others, of course, thought you were with us. When we got out at this station and saw you nowhere, we were just dumbfounded; were we not, Mr. Paget?"

Mr. Paget, be it remarked, was the wearer of the brown coat.

"Dumbfounded," echoed that original gentleman.

"It was very sly of you, Miss Attison, you know; very sly indeed of you and my young friend Lydell here," waggishly observed a dense old 'squire, one of Sir Edgar's especial cronies. "You might have stated your intentions handsomely, and spared some of us the anxiety we've been enduring. Macarthy here was wanting to alter all the signals, and force the train back, or order a special to search for you; and as for Mr. Donnington—"

"If Mr. Donnington's anxiety, or yours shall we say, Mr. Turner," Aubrey laughingly carried the war into the enemy's camp, "had been aroused early enough to have come to my rescue when I was caught like a spider in a net, I should have been grateful, and you would have been spared such terrible suffering."

"Ha, ha! caught in a *net*, were you? You now, or Mr. Lydell? Ha, ha! a *net*! Capital joke!" Aubrey took her tea, and tossed aside her hat as she sunk into the chair by the logs leaping and crackling up the old-fashioned chimney.

"Yours was very impossible advice about tearing my dress, Alberta. I should have been imprisoned in that gap to this hour if Mr. Lydell had not luckily come past with a knife."

"Sly dog—sly dog!" laughed the rubicund Mr. Turner, enjoying himself immensely.

"And there are my flounces left lamented," continued Miss Attison, holding up her mutilated skirt.

"Well, you are here now, dear; and the adventure might have ended worse," my lady remarked, placidly.

"Most decidedly," agreed Lydell's quiet voice. "May I trouble you for another cup?"

"Most decidedly, for Lydell, confound him!" muttered Mr. Donnington, in the loud aside of jealousy.

"Miss Attison, I dare say, found the walk more pleasant than you or I should have done," chimed in, with the sweetness of spite, a mature young lady who had had views of her own regarding handsome Max Lydell—views which, unfortunately, he never seemed capable of understanding. "You are so fond of walking, I know, dear" (with a honeyed turn to Aubrey); "and those woods in the gloaming must be charmingly romantic."

"And dreary," Miss Attison finished, clearly. "It might have been a walk to your taste, Laura; for myself, I don't see how my adventure, as Alberta calls it, could have ended

much worse, unless it had necessitated a *longer* walk under the same circumstances."

She looked not at Miss Laura Bromley, but at her companion of that walk, as she spoke the last words, her eyes meeting his steadily, with a defiant flash in their beauty.

"The statue itself again, with a vengeance!" he thought, watching the haughty girl possessing herself of her hat to retire up-stairs. "I would give a year's income to understand this woman,"—he paused a moment, with the contrasting remembrance of that frank glance upturned to his in the woods, then finished out the thought as once before—"or conquer her."

CHAPTER III.

FRIENDS OR FOES?

"We are all quite interested in this letter waiting for you," laughed Lady Perriman, in her morning greeting to Mr. Lydell. "It has traveled about so perseveringly in search of you, and its complicity of directions so nearly occasioned old Bubbs, at the post-office here, a fit. He sent up a touching message with the letter-bag this morning, hoping you would find it all satisfactory."

"It is satisfactory, thanks," said Lydell, refolding the foreign document. "Good news. An old friend, whom I had not expected to see for years," he continued, after pausing to exchange a chilly greeting with Miss Attison, who came gliding in at the moment, elegant and blooming, "is on his way home from Australia. An unexpected stroke of good fortune having befallen him, his banishment from England has attained its end, and ended itself."

"Is he from this neighborhood? Any name we know?" inquired my lady, politely interested.

"No; he is a north-countryman—George Skipworth." And as he uttered the name, it chanced that his eyes strayed across to Aubrey opposite, and too well did he know her countenance to mistake the signs of disturbance on it now.

He followed the direction of her glance toward her cousin, but no statue could be less suggestive of agitation than Lady Perriman pouring out tea and raising her bright face to greet a fresh entrance of laggard breakfasters.

"Ah, you are north-country, Miss Attison, too!" Max Lydell said, quickly. "Do you know the name at all?"

"I knew a Mr. Skipworth once—slightly," she stammered, taken unawares, and under that quiet gaze faintly coloring.

"It is not such an uncommon name, certainly. You told me once, if I remember rightly, that you took rather a special interest in Australia. You must let me introduce my friend and his reliable information."

"He will be making some stay with you?" And there was an accent in her voice that might indicate anxiety.

"Some little stay, no doubt."

Later, on the terrace, Aubrey's hand slipped through her cousin's arm, and Aubrey's anxious blue eyes were raised to her cousin's face. "Alberta, you heard Mr. Lydell at breakfast? You heard from whom he said his letter came?"

"I hear you now, and your tragic tone; and know the absurd surmises you are going to inflict upon me, if I'll listen, which I won't. Aubrey, how can you be such a perfect goose?" responded Alberta, very pleasantly, shaking herself free.

"I'm convinced it is the same George Skipworth," persisted Aubrey's low voice. "From the north he came, and went to Australia. He has gained his object, and is coming home to (as he thinks, poor fellow) claim you. Alberta, what shall you do?"

"Display a little more common sense than you are doing at present, I hope, my dear," with her pretty laugh. "Skipworth—the name is as common as stones on the road in the north. There may be a hundred Skipworths seeking fortunes abroad at this identi-

cal moment, for anything you or I know; another hundred successful searchers on their homeward way to join expectant friends. Don't conjure up any more impossible horrors, I beg of you, my dear; but come and have a little tennis practice. Captain Fusell,"—to that gallant hussar officer appearing on the steps,—“we are organizing a return match; will you play?”

Time certainly wends his flight pleasantly at Perriman Hall.

If Sir Edgar be stiff, and slow, and crotchety, as some of his younger guests aver, no siren could be more bewitching than his wife. No hostess could be more unfailing in pleasant resource and suggestion; no organizer could be more indefatigable or successful than Lady Perriman; so time flies apace in rides and drives, shooting and billiards, strolls on the terrace, and tea in the hall. Musical evenings and impromptu dances or theatricals, with mirth and flirtation, pervading all.

Guests came, and guests went; and Max Lydell yielded willingly enough to his host's repeated entreaties that he would consider the Hall his home until his own place was thoroughly ready to receive him.

Naturally or arrangedly, he and Miss Attison were thrown very much together, but he had not yet fathomed the secret of her perplexing caprice—nor had he subdued it.

He found it quite an engrossing study, though, that caprice; good to enliven what might be otherwise monotonous evenings, to diversify breakfasts and afternoon tea, and fill up many idle moments interestingly, for Aubrey had varied of late.

Constant dropping, they say, wears away stone. Unremitting perseverance wins a smile now and again; and occasionally, and, as it generally seemed, in temporary forgetfulness, the girl could not help being her natural, true-hearted self toward the man to whom in reaction the next minute she might be ice and insolence.

Lady Perriman was in her element in the house filled by her own invitations.

Admiration and homage was as necessary to her as air; and well-dressed, courteous puppets, obedient to her touch on the strings, formed the court her grace and beauty loved best to rule over, so that not many sparks of genius or weights of sense were as a rule to be found in Perriman Hall.

Such frivolous assemblages, chattering away life, were hardly more to Aubrey's taste than the one or two minds heavily stocked with agriculture and nothing else, in whose society alone Sir Edgar found delight.

Max Lydell not unfrequently told himself the same fact; and yet those two, upon whom so many more congenial invitations were pressed, still lingered here, and Aubrey said it was because she had promised not to desert her cousin that autumn.

Mr. Lydell knew it was from Perriman Hall alone that he could personally superintend the alterations in progress at his own place.

They were grouped at tennis one afternoon; my lady, who was a splendid player, standing on one side of the net with Captain Fusell, her favored cavalier of the moment, and with whom she was carrying on as near an approach to flirtation as fear of her husband's patent jealousy, and the uncertainty of the form that jealousy might take on emergency, would allow.

Were it not for such wholesome fear, her ladyship would be what her nature prompted—a desperate flirt; and as it was, her inordinate love of and craving for admiration carried her pretty far that way, and put her diplomacy to severe tests now and again to avert the consequences of her own folly.

Aubrey was standing on the opposite side of the net, with Max Lydell by her side; and Aubrey was cross, for she played tennis badly, and disliked it, and saw through her cousin's inveiglement of herself that afternoon.

“You are prepared for another beating, of course?” was her cheering remark to her part-

ner. “You seem to find more pleasure in them than I can truthfully say I do.”

“If the fight be a good one, I don't mind its result,” he laughed. “But I scarcely think our opponents will have it all their own way this time.”

“As far as I am concerned, they certainly will,” she answered, disagreeably.

Yet, in spite of herself, she got excited in the game as the balls bounced, and flew, and avoided the ground; and from admiration of the ease and dexterity with which her companion supplied all deficiencies on her part, was roused to exert herself in emulation; caught a ball or so cleverly; elicited commendation from Major Macarthy, who hurried eagerly up the terrace to look on; then flew after a higher ball Lydell was calculating to take, jumbled up against him, and, slipping, fell a pretty heap of cashmere on the asphalt floor.

The bit of india-rubber rolled away unheeded, as he bent in instant solicitude over her.

“It was my confounded clumsiness! I shall never forgive myself if you are hurt.”

“I am not,” she said, promptly rising, without notice of his proffered hand. “At least, not much.”

“Your wrist is bleeding; I have hurt you wretchedly!” he persisted, in a tone suggesting a murderer's depth of remorse.

“It was not you in the least. It was my own awkwardness entirely”—with those beautiful eyes raised frankly to his.

“Can you go on playing?” asked my lady, averse to having her amusement interrupted. “If you think you can't manage, Major Macarthy—”

“Will be delighted to be of service,” finished that buoyant gentleman, “although well aware what an inferior substitute he will be.”

“Perhaps Mr. Lydell may tell another story. He knows my tennis capabilities intimately now!” Aubrey laughed.

“Miss Attison at tennis is just what she is at everything else—perfection!” insisted the unscrupulous Irishman.

“Is that your verdict?” Aubrey mischievously turned to her late partner.

“With the reservation of tennis, yes!” he said, slowly fixing his eyes on hers, and his tone too low for any ears but hers to catch.

She crimsoned furiously, and bent to bandage her wrist.

“I detest compliments!” in a hauteur ostensibly intended as the Major's rebuff. “Whoever troubles to pay me them only lowers whatever respect I hold him in.”

“And if already held in none! How do they affect his position, then?” inquired Lydell, quietly, while the Major hastened to excuse himself.

“And what compliment can there be—I appeal to the company generally—in stating fact? In the face of your insinuation, Miss Attison, unjust as cruel, I hold to my assertions, and prove them. You ride to perfection, you drive to perfection! Pray, where's the compliment in that?”

“Oh, I'm not a bit deficient in self-appreciation,” the girl laughed. “I know exactly what I can do, and didn't find fault with you for declaring I could ride or drive.”

“Hear that, now!” turning triumphantly. “And if I say you dance to perfection, dress to perfection, talk, flirt, charm to perfection, am I complimentary there?”

“No; but shirking the point of dispute, which was tennis!”

“Sure, and does every one think alike? Can't there be two opinions about perfection in a paltry game like that? And if I can't hold one and you the other, without any thought of compliments, this isn't the free country you English rave about.”

“Will you give us practical demonstration of your tennis opinions?” said my lady, laughing, but tired of the interruption; and forthwith the warrior, with a wave of his racket, rushed into the *melee*.

“Miss Attison, you have not yet deigned to

answer my question,” Max observed, standing by the corner, where she leaned with her banded hand to watch the finish of the game.

“Your question? I'm afraid I must trouble you to repeat it.”

“Very simple arithmetic. If a man granted a certain quantity of respect lose so much by a certain number of compliments, how do the same compliments affect the man already held in no respect?”

She shrugged her pretty shoulders.

“I always hated arithmetic, and my experience is at fault here; for I do not know any one for whom I entertain no respect.”

“No?” he questioned, skeptically. “Then disrespect and dislike are not synonymous?”

But coloring deeply, she turned away.

Dinner was later than usual that evening, to accommodate business of Sir Edgar's, and the space between tea and the dressing-bell seemed unusually long.

Aubrey, sauntering into the drawing-room, found it gloomy and unlighted, with melancholy shadows in its vastness that, nevertheless, accorded better with her present tone of mind than the giggling chatter floating from up-stairs, or the desultory knocking about of billiard-balls from across the hall.

Passing through the larger, she seated herself at the piano in the smaller drawing-room, where, though the chandeliers were unlighted, the fire was brighter, and the dark corners nearer, and her fingers, wandering over the keys, played the accompaniment to her own thoughts.

They were sad ones, if the music told true—sweet, low, pathetic strains, played with a softness and depth of expression that will be wanting in that brilliant fantasia she will acquit herself of at my lady's customary request three or four hours later, and so as much better worth hearing than that dashing public performance as three heartfelt words are to three hours' head speech.

The dreamy, white fingers told no fibs—Aubrey's thoughts were sad. Bravely as she bore herself before her cousin, she was also too sweetly feminine not to feel acutely the unpleasantness of the position she must perform accept.

The uncertainty, the possibilities, the *bondage* of present and future, were pressing very heavily on her mind just then; and did she not play, Aubrey might sit and cry—albeit that was an unsatisfactory weakness her brave nature utterly scorned.

How long she had been not alone in the room she knew not, when at length she rose to close the instrument with a sigh, and a voice from the fireside said, earnestly, “Must you really stop? Oh, please, one thing more!”

“Mr. Lydell! When did you come in?” was her startled answer.

He was stretched full length on the couch, with his hands clasped above his head in an attitude of luxurious and perfect enjoyment, interrupted as Miss Attison crossed to the fire, and he rose slowly to his feet.

“I beg your pardon; your music brought me. Thanks, so much, Miss Attison; it has been delicious.”

“I was playing for myself, and, as I imagined, to myself,” she returned, civilly; and he laughed.

“I assure you I was quite conscious of how little you thought you were conferring pleasure on me; nevertheless, you have done so, and I thank you all the same.” She stooped to warm her hands, and he continued presently: “That was not your usual style of playing, and was a little mournful, wasn't it?”

“We cannot be always in exuberant spirits.”

“It was as my mother used to play, in the twilight; and I, a boy, stretched at her feet for hours, listening. Do you know, I could almost have fancied it years ago again; myself without the knowledge of the world's care or grief, and the only woman I ever loved my guardian angel once again.”

Aubrey did not laugh at the dreamy tone, at the softened, intense look in the eyes turned

PLEDGED TO MARRY.

upon her. Into her lovely face there sprung its greatest soul-subduing charm, *sympathy*; and Lydell started at the wondrous beauty of the girl he had never seen as now.

"You were very fond of your mother—tell me about her. I should like to hear!"

In the soft, subtle light bathing her radiant hair, and lingering in the gray folds of her dress, he talked and she listened, her glance frankly meeting his, her voice winning him out of himself.

In the firelight they forgot; and when the servant entered with lights, and Miss Bromley, flowing, declared, meaningly, "We have been looking for you two *separately* every where; what a nice little firelit *tete-a-tete* I am disturbing, to be sure!" Aubrey answered, in full remembrance:

"To me, at all events, a very welcome interruption, I assure you, Laura."

"Aubrey, do you mind driving to Bolton this morning?" Lady Perriman asked, a few days after. "Miss Bromley wants to catch the express, and it does not stop at this station, you know. The luggage has gone on, and I meant to drive Laura myself, but find I can't very well leave home this morning."

Aubrey would do more than drive to Bolton to get rid of Miss Bromley, her girlish affections and her bitter tongue, so the pretty carriage came around at the proper time, and my lady was left to profitably spend her morning on a couch with a novel, or on the terrace in foolish chatter, while Aubrey did the long, cold drive bravely, and congratulated herself when Miss Bromley said her amicable farewell on the Bolton platform. Then the girl did a few errands for her cousin in the town before she drove thoughtfully home through the lanes, which, perfectly lovely in summer, were dreary slush now.

Half-way home, in a lane whose ruts were deeper and its banks higher than ever, the young lady was startled by a jolt, a drop, and a frightened start forward of the pony she had luckily well in hand, and rolling away to the ditch before her, Aubrey saw neither more nor less than one of her carriage-wheels.

"Here is a predicament!" she sighed, when having succeeded in pulling up the startled pony, she stood at its head in the mud, and looked vainly about for help, or sign of it.

"What in the world I am to do, except unharness the pony and lead it home, I have no idea. And the mud and the distance—ugh!"

She stood patting the shivering pony awhile, and regretting her scornful rejection of Alberta's tiger, then began in despair among the straps and buckles, but her fingers were chilled, and Dido's uneasiness was increasing every moment.

Suddenly on the still air came the bark of a dog, and the tones of a man shouting to the animal.

"I know that voice," said Aubrey, with a slight accession of color, and a curious indecision, considering her only wish a moment ago was for sign of some human presence.

"Shall I call to him or not? He will pass on if I do not. Shall I? Quiet, Dido! Oh, dear! if it were but the Major or any one else! Shall I call him? No, I don't think I will."

Then the setter cleared the hedge before the pony's very nose, and restless Dido gave a shrill neigh in recognition of a friend.

"What are you up to now, Set?" said her master, leisurely following to ascertain whence his whistle was disregarded.

"Why, Miss Attison, you have come to grief! Was it a spill, or how did it happen?"

"The wheel rolled off of its own accord, I assure you; and we have been standing in this interesting position, Dido and I, for an age, as it has seemed to me."

"Why in the world didn't you call me?" he said, depositing his gun safely against a tree and making rapid work of that unharnessing. "I should not have seen you at all but for Set's officiousness; but you must have heard the row I was making. Why did not you call?"

"Were you going into Bolton by the footpath?" she asked, evading his question.

He glanced up from the traces he was stooping over, to the lovely face, with its haughty stamp that he knew so well.

"Coming back. I've been taking my gun to Locker's—a little thing I wanted him to set right; and intended to strike across these fields into the fir-covers, and so join the other men."

"I am sorry you should be so detained."

"And I am not at all sorry to be so detained," he answered with peculiar emphasis. And she stood silently watching him as he fastened Dido to the nearest fence, and threw the fur rug over her, ere stooping to examine the carriage.

"The linch-pin is broken, but I think I can manage a temporary substitute."

"Can I help at all?" she volunteered, rather confusedly. "That is dreadfully heavy for you to lift alone."

"Dreadfully heavy for you to attempt to handle; and it is so muddy here." He raised his head concernedly. "Over there by Dido will be dryer for you, if you don't mind; and I will have this all right—temporarily, that is to say—in a few minutes."

Obediently she went, and obediently she waited, till he had put the pony again in the shafts, and assured her, "It is all safe now; and if you'll get in and hold the reins, I will walk by the side and keep an eye on that wheel. You won't object to my gun; it isn't loaded."

"I couldn't think of taking you so completely out of your way," she said. "I am extremely obliged to you for what you have done, and can get home now alone, just as well as I came."

"With the chance of a few repetitions of the accident between here and home. I have only managed a *temporary* repair, I told you."

Aubrey was again about to speak, but Lydell went on.

"Excuse me, Miss Attison, but these lanes are free to every one; and if I incline to pace slowly down them in your wake, I cannot see that you have any right to object."

She laughed, and got into the carriage, and for some time there reigned an awkward silence, broken abruptly by Lydell thus: "And why did you prefer standing alone, and in mud, beside a disabled carriage and fidgety pony, with three good miles before you to be traversed somehow, to uttering one sound to bring me to your assistance?"

The question was so unexpected, that the girl, with no crushing answer ready, took refuge in evasion. "Did I declare my preference?"

"Certainly; by your action—or, rather, *in* action. Had Macarthy, Donnington, Fusell, or even old Turner, been Set's companion just now, you know you would have called either to your aid unhesitatingly. To an utter stranger you would have done the same; to any one but the man you dislike most in the world."

Aubrey—whose ready speech so rarely deserted her—could find no word to utter; and Max, after a glance at the fair, disturbed face, softened his tone.

"How have I earned your invincible aversion? One takes dislikes involuntarily and without conscious reasoning, we know; but this aversion of yours to me seems something more than that, and yet I am utterly ignorant of any offense given. If there has been such, I swear it has been unknowingly—I need hardly say *unintentionally*, for I would forfeit lands, wealth, name" (and the passion in the thrilling tones was but the stronger for its suppression), "ay, life itself, rather than harm or displease you by word, look, or action; and—I think you know as much."

If to be pale and agitated said anything, she did know it; nay, more, believed it. In the tumult of her mind she argued, Should she tell him how unwitting was his offense—how deeply the careless words, whose utterance he has no doubt long forgotten, have been ringing in

the ears he never intended to hear them? Should she repeat them to him frankly now, and, forgiving and forgetting, make friends as he evidently wished, and end this warfare, of which she was (her traitor heart told her) so desperately weary?

The confession is trembling on her tongue, when her evil genius whispers, "How mean and despicable he would think such malice borne so long, and from cause so trivial! Why should I, by so humiliating a confession, destroy the respect I have wrested from him at last?"

Far better quietly to accept his overtures of friendship—more than *friendship* it must never be—and let such sorry bygones rest.

So she turned with a light in her liquid eyes, and with her own bright smile, "I have no explanation to offer, Mr. Lydell; but I think, perhaps, if my pride will let me, a few apologies—nay, a good many—and cessation of hostilities—"

"And what do you offer in their place?" he queried, with that quiet, unfathomable smile.

"Friendship, if you like—sincere friendship."

She put out her hand, half timidly, as she uttered the words, smilingly; but did not look at him, even when he took it in his strong, warm clasp, that held it so much closer, so much longer, than even the importance of the occasion demanded.

"I accept it most gratefully, most heartily, and never shall you have cause to repent your kindness."

Had her offer been of herself and her affections, his thanks could not have been more chivalrous or more fervently uttered, she thought; and, to cover her embarrassment, said, with a laugh, "You catalogued my circle of friends once, do you remember? Under which heading now do you wish to enroll yourself—country driving?"

"Don't remind me of past rudeness," he pleaded. "I assure you I am quite penitent enough."

Then they turned into the park, and the guns from the home plantations rung into the conversation.

Only when Aubrey was divesting herself of her hat and jacket did it occur to her to wonder how much Max Lydell knew respecting her engagement, or what version of the affair might have reached him; also, whether it would not have been wholesome candor on her part to have introduced *that* subject into the confidence, in case—"in case," she thought, abstractedly fingering the pretty things on the toilet table, "he might be ignorant of the whole affair. Not that it would matter one scrap if he were—of course not—only that friends should not have secrets from each other. But I dare say Alberta has told him and everybody else *her* version of my engagement. I will ask her."

"Indeed I have done no such thing," said my lady, when Aubrey, with some hesitation, made that inquiry next day. "I see no necessity to publish my cousin's lunacy so long as there is the chance of disinclination on the part of the bushranger, or whatever uncouth thing he may be; or the possibility of any accident between here and Australia, or something happy and unforeseen turning up in time to save your social suicide. But why should I have confided in Max Lydell particularly, pray?" she mischievously questioned.

"I don't know," stammered Aubrey, taken aback. "Not in *him* particularly at all, only I think people generally may just as well know it now as later. It can never be more perfectly settled than at this moment—for, Alberta, I had my answer from Mr. Grey this morning."

"You did not?"

Aubrey rose, and stood examining the flowers in the window, with her back toward her cousin.

"I did. He accepts me unconditionally, and with much apparent delight."

"The wretch!" groaned her ladyship; "of

course he does. Oh, Aubrey, what a pity you weren't born poor! Let him have your money, and save yourself that way." In a sudden happy burst of inspiration, "You won't want your fortune if you marry Max Ly—"

"I tell you I adhere to my promise," Aubrey interrupted, in a tone whose quickness may be temper or pain.

"Show me your love-letter, dear."

"No; it would not be right," excuses Aubrey, uneasily, destroying those flowers.

My lady, in her quick perception, smiled. "You would let me see it, dear, if it were one you were proud to show. Aubrey, I know I am right. It is to an uneducated, half-civilized boor you are so willfully determined to sacrifice yourself. Now look me in the face" (and her ladyship puts a strong white hand on either wrist), "and say if that letter be such as a gentleman would write—such a gentleman, for instance, as Max Lydell?"

"What has Max Lydell to do with it?" cried goaded Aubrey, snatching herself away from her laughing tormentor. "You have no right to suppose my future husband any less a gentleman than your own lord and master. He was born one, at any rate; and it is unfair to judge by such a trifling as a letter. He is coming over himself as soon as possible, he tells me, and then—"

"And then," finished my lady, promptly, "you will receive him in rapture, with promises to love, honor and obey."

"I shall redeem my promise" (the sweet voice gathered firmness), "and do my duty by my husband."

CHAPTER IV.

A WOMAN'S VOWS.

"THREE letters for you, my lady," said Sir Edgar Perriman, courteously handing her share of the emptied bag across the breakfast-table; and my lady stifled a yawn as she turned them languidly over with the tips of her ringed fingers.

"Alberta, what are you doing?" Aubrey cried, so suddenly that Sir Edgar elevated his eyebrows significantly.

Lady Perriman was only pouring, in a straightforward, steady manner, the contents of the silver tea-pot over the cup and around the cup, anywhere but into the cup before her, with her eyes fixed on the opened letter held in her other hand.

At her cousin's exclamation she started, and murmuring something about "this stupid tea-pot," swept angrily across to the bell.

As Captain Fusell and three other gentlemen flew, like propelled pellets, to intercept her trouble, the wide sheet of paper she held fluttered into the grate, the blaze leaped and caught it, and my lady returned to her seat smiling, as a servant, to rectify her mistake, and Mr. Lydell, from an ante-breakfast ride, entered simultaneously.

But when Sir Edgar had gone pompously forth to his morning interview with his steward and agent, my lady, crossing the drawing-room to attract Aubrey's attention to her crewels ostensibly, whispered among the wools, "Come up to my boudoir in five minutes. There is something I must tell you at once." And when, at the appointed time, Aubrey obediently followed to the luxurious flower-decked boudoir, she found her cousin standing by the window with a shade on the lovely face deeper than that cast by the rose silk hangings.

"Aubrey, I had a *horrible* letter this morning"—vehemently tossing a tassel—"from that stupid George Skipworth himself."

"And he is coming home?" Aubrey cried.

"Worse than coming. He has come!"

"Oh, poor fellow! Alberta, what does he say?"

"Well, I burned the letter, as perhaps you saw, but I can tell you its contents. Botheration! Stupidity!" she breaks off, rising angrily to pace the rose-strewn carpet, and looking handsomer than ever as she does so. "Why on earth should I be tormented in this way?"

Aubrey could tell the reason, but merely asked, "What were the contents?"

"Why, would you believe any man could be so credulous, so foolish, as to imagine that I meant all I said before he left England,—said, you know, just in the pain of parting, and in the comforting belief that we two should never meet again? Thought I really meant it all, and has toiled and waited (so he says—I really don't believe the half of it), obeying my commands about not writing, but thinking of me at every moment of his life (more fool he!), and buoyed up by my parting vows, as he has the audacity to call them, until an unexpected stroke of good fortune lifted him into a position of competency, and he flew toward home on the wings of love, never dreaming that I could be found in any position save the exact one in which he had left me!"

"Alberta, I felt certain, as you know, that that friend of Mr. Lydell's returning from Australia would prove to be the same George Skipworth you have treated so heartlessly. You laughed at my idea, but—"

"It is no laughing matter now, I grant you. Australia seems full of evil for you and me. George has only just learned that which filled all the papers six months ago—Alberta Attison's brilliant marriage. His toiling and waiting has been carried on in a remote region, it seems, where marriage announcements do not penetrate; but I wish some kind friend had given him the benefit of the bad tidings earlier, for the end of this letter, written under the sudden shock, I can make neither head nor tail of. Such a mixture of upbraiding, imploring and reminding. Oh, really, Aubrey, what a nuisance men are, after all!"

And my lady, sinking exhausted into her velvet chair, looked a martyr.

"You certainly treated this one shamefully, wickedly!" Aubrey said, a great pity mingled with her indignation.

"My dear child, I don't want to hear what I have done, but your advice as to what I should do now to calm this wronged individual. The part of this letter that gave me that turn at breakfast was a threat of coming down here after me—whether for further upbraiding, or with some dim idea of an elopement, he does not say, but is not the interview a pleasant prospect?"

"You deserve a far worse punishment," under her breath.

"Perhaps so, dear,"—stretching her little slippers foot to the blaze, and clasping her hands in a graceful negligence behind her head. "And if I were married to any style of husband but a *jealous* one, I should not grumble about the prospect of a little exciting novelty. I declare I should be rather pleased than otherwise to see poor old George again if I were not doubtful about Edgar's welcome for him. By the way, did you notice how Edgar eyed that unfortunate Captain Fusell last evening, when he and I were singing that duet? I hope your bushman won't have jealousy among his other fascinations, Aubrey. It is a terrible quality for a husband to possess."

"Are you going to answer Mr. Skipworth's letter?"

"I shall write him a cool three lines, so worded as to stop, I fondly hope, his threatened journey hither."

But the threatened journey was taken in spite of those carefully worded three lines.

On a crisp, cold afternoon, my lady and her cousin—only my lady and her cousin, which the former declared afterward to be the most marvelous piece of good luck—walking toward the home plantation, encountered suddenly, at the corner where the station road diverged, a man, striding in the direction of the Hall—a man short, and thick-set, and bronzed, yet, withal, as gentlemanly and good-looking as two-thirds of the favored guests then scattered in the Perriman preserves, and the reports of whose guns came sharply on the breeze to the ladies as they stood to greet the stranger.

My lady was a shade paler than her wont, a

shade haughtier; by no other sign did she evince the slightest discomposure.

Aubrey was far more nervous, unable to make a single even commonplace remark, and trembling as she stood before the wild, haggard desperation of the man she intuitively felt had lost his all.

"And so we meet again, at last, *my lady!*" said Skipworth, with a harsh, grating laugh.

"Yes," she assented, sweetly, with the sunlight full on her calm face, but her eyes resting anywhere than on the glistening bloodshot orbs confronting them.

"This is the pleasure I have so long promised myself!" he went on, roughly. "One more look at the curse of my life—that is to say, one more gaze into your pretty face, my lady!"

"I shall hear perfectly well, Mr. Skipworth, if you speak a little lower," she returned, smiling, but with a quick, apprehensive glance around. "What you can have to say to me to necessitate this visit, of which, of course, I duly appreciate the honor," with a mocking bow, that shatters his false composure, "I am at a loss to imagine, but shall be glad to hear, if you will speak quickly," glancing at her watch. "We dine early, and—"

"Alberta!" he burst in, hoarsely. "Do you remember our parting?"

"No, really," with a pretty shrug; "you cannot expect every one's memory to be so perfect as your own."

"You lie!" and Aubrey shuddered at the tempest in the face from which her cousin's gaze was so studiously averted. "You lie, and you know it. As well as I do you recollect that summer afternoon, when, under the oak by the river, you twined your arms about me, and with tears in those eyes on whose truth I would have staked my life, the eyes that dare not now meet mine, swore—swore! do you hear, my lady?—to be true even unto death—to be mine, mine alone!"

"What a touching reminiscence!" And she languidly buttoned her glove.

"Touching!" with teeth set hard, and words hissed through them. "Are you a woman or fiend, to stand smiling there?"

"You are a pattern of politeness, at any rate," she laughed; and Aubrey put an entreaty hand forward.

"Alberta, do not—in mercy, do not!"

"Do not what, my dear? Not congratulate Mr. Skipworth on his delicate choice of words? This repartee is very amusing," she turned gracefully to him, "but does not bring us much nearer the real business of our interview. You have not surely taken this trouble and long journey merely to compare my memory with your own, or to pay me the compliment of even so grateful and gentlemanly an insinuation as your last?"

"Then I came to curse you!" he cried, unsteadily grasping a tree for support, as a drunken man might do. "To curse the false beauty, the lying lips, the devil's smiles, that have ruined me body and soul! And, if curses cling, as they say they do, then may mine—"

"Oh, hush, Mr. Skipworth!—hush, I implore!" cried Aubrey, frantically, closing his lips, with her hand. "Alberta, how can you so taunt and madden him? You see his condition. Say something kind, something conciliating; just a word, I entreat you!" in an agitated whisper.

Lady Perriman considered. All the wild words she had been hearing were but so many feathers on her well-regulated mind. A little excitement, and the first words that come uppermost; she knew George Skipworth of old. Still, as it is an inconvenient time for this sort of thing, and an inconvenient place—for those guns sound nearer and nearer, and there may be wisdom in Miss Attison's suggestion—she is not above accepting it.

"Talking in this wild way can do no good now, George," she said, bending nearer, and using the low, sweet tones that had haunted him like never-to-be-forgotten music through those long and weary, yet hopeful years. "It

is done now; and however you or I may repent it, nothing can undo the fact that I am another man's wife. If you knew all, perhaps you would not blame me quite so cruelly; but I do not complain. I deserve your anger, and submit to it, as I must do to the reproaches of my own conscience."

My lady, at her wit's end to continue the speech so successfully begun, was saved trouble by Skipworth's fall to the ground in a sudden paroxysm of almost childish sobs and anguish.

"I loved you so dearly, Alberta—so truly, so wholly! I do not grudge you the heart you have spurned and broken; but why did you not kill me outright when your love changed? Why leave to me a life from which you had crushed out every hope?"

Alberta's quick ear caught the sound of other voices approaching; recognized one, as also the slow, stately footstep, and knew there were two paths the returning sportsmen might take, and that one would bring, in less than three minutes, Sir Edgar upon the spot where a stranger lay writhing upon the soft greensward of his park, and upbraiding his wife as none but a former lover could have the right to do.

My lady is self-possessed and prompt.

"Aubrey, you will help me this once again?" in a fervent whisper. "Coax him to rise, and go away. You can do it much better than I, who would be lost if Edgar should hear this man, and see me near him."

Then, waiting no answer, the graceful figure glided among the trees, and was out of sight.

It was a rather trying position for Miss Attison; but, true to her kindly, unselfish nature, she accepted it, and faltered, in a vain effort to imitate her cousin's composure.

"It is all over now, Mr. Skipworth. Do not give way so utterly, I entreat. You are a man, remember; then bear this like one!"

"A man!" he laughed, horribly. "A tortured dog—a cur that, once petted and caressed, is now spurned and kicked aside! There is little enough manhood left in me, I assure you!"

There was silence again around the spot, for Sir Edgar and his friends had chosen the right path, after all; and there was a long pause before Aubrey, with tears in her soft, sweet eyes, murmured, impulsively, "I wish I could do anything to help you. I cannot tell you how sorry, how *very* sorry I am!"

Skipworth made no rejoinder, and, as the minutes slipped by, the girl, in desperation, conquered her timidity sufficiently to urge, "Forgive me; I have no right to dictate, but is it wise of you to stay here? Would it not be better to go away, for it could only be fresh pain to see Alberta again, and—and—"

"And—and," he mocked, fiercely, "to take myself out of her way is the best service I can render now to the woman who once vowed her life into my keeping. Well," rising and shaking himself like the tortured animal he said he was, "I will act upon your friendly hint, and take myself out of your way—out of *her* way—out of—" But the last muttered words Aubrey failed to catch.

As she watched the man's swift, uncertain steps down the station-road, great pitiful tears dimmed her sight; and perhaps it was they, or perhaps the fast-creeping evening shades, that prevented her noticing another figure within a stone's throw of where she was standing.

A tall, slight figure, in velveteen shooting-coat, and leaning upon his gun, with his face paler than usual, and with a fixed, curious look turned in her direction.

Aubrey carried home through the dusk her aching remembrance of that other face's pain, and the despairing words it would be long ere she forgot; but their recital failed at all to affect her ladyship.

"Well, dear," she said, cheerfully, glancing at her satin dinner dress spread out on the couch, and touching the bell for her maid,— "well, there is one good thing in this wretched afternoon, at any rate; which is, that no creature but ourselves knows anything about it. Nice talk one-half of the tale would make in

this gossiping neighborhood! How the wretches would hug and chuckle over it!"

As Skipworth strode down the road, his steps mechanically bearing him toward the station he had so lately quitted, a hand touched his shoulder, and a voice said, "George, old fellow, I don't want to intrude; but if you can stand a word or so of sympathy and consolation from an old friend—"

"I can't," replied the other hastily, shrinking aside as he quickened his steps. "Ah, Lydell, is it you?" as the familiar face forced itself upon his dazed senses. "I had forgotten you were in this part of the country. Don't stop me now, there's a good fellow. Look me up in town; I'm off there now."

"Skipworth,"—Lydell hesitated, wringing the offered hand, with his honest, friendly look straight into the other's eyes—"forgive my impertinence; we have been friends, and fast ones, so long, you and I. Don't take this matter so to heart—she isn't worth it; and you'll see it in that light yourself before long, old man, and bless your lucky escape from such a heartless, mercenary piece of selfishness. Meanwhile scorn her as she has scorned the honest man, too good for her."

"Fine talking!" groaned poor Skipworth, whose self-command vanished at touch of sympathy. "Easy for you, who don't know what it is for one woman to be all the world to you. Wait till you have trusted and worshipped as I have done, and have met with my reward! Wait till the lips that have given you kisses and vows throw you the stabs hers have dealt to me to-day! Wait till the light and hope of your life dies out suddenly, in a moment, and then talk of taking matters to heart and scorning a perfidious woman!"

"You were engaged to—to Miss Attison?" Lydell forced the words from his lips, and shuddered as they awoke laughter that had no pretensions to mirth.

"Engaged? Do vows and promises, with soft, twining arms, and eyes that wile your senses away, mean engagement? Ha, ha! Not a bit of it!—when a richer man presents himself! What is love or honor to *money* nowadays?"

Then he checks the bitter wildness of his manner suddenly.

"Forgive me, Lydell! This is a queer greeting to the old chum I have not seen for years; but you see how it is. I've just had a knock-down, and cannot pick myself up yet. Leave me to myself now, and look me up in town in a day or two."

"May I run up with you to-night?" Max asks, impulsively. "Let us have a chat over old times together?"

"No, no!" uttered in a way there was no protesting against. "I am no company for any one just now, for I tell you I am nearly mad!"

Then, with one more silent hand-gripe, the two friends part—for the last time on earth.

Possibly that evening was not a particularly happy one for Lady Perriman, although she sung and smiled, and talked and flirted—the latter to as great an extent as Sir Edgar's very suspicious eye allowed—as uninterrupted and bewitchingly as usual.

For Aubrey it was a very disappointing and distressing evening.

For the first time since Max Lydell's arrival at the Hall, the chair beside her white dress and her crewels was filled by Major Macarthy in bliss; and the girl, in her quick parrying of compliments and brilliancy even greater than usual, was not for one moment unaware of Lydell's sudden attraction toward another chair—the chair of a girl only one degree less pretty than Aubrey herself, and who evinced no distaste for attentions she had long secretly coveted.

Amid the Irishman's volubility, Aubrey heard every word that other deep, languid voice exerted itself to utter to that other girl.

To Aubrey, whose offer of friendship it accepted so enthusiastically yesterday, it said only these words through the length of the

evening—"I am going up to town to-morrow to stay with that old friend of mine you heard me say I was expecting from Australia—George Skipworth. Do you remember?"

Aubrey faltered something as she flashed a fearful glance across to her cousin; but my lady, from amid her circle of satellites, betrayed not by one eyelid's flutter whether or no she had heard.

In confidential dressing-room chat, a little later, more than one young lady remarked to an intimate friend that "Mr. Lydell's attention to Aubrey Attison seems cooling off, my dear, most unmistakably!"

Nevertheless, in three days Mr. Lydell was back from London, and the first person he greeted was Miss Attison, whom he found alone in the drawing-room.

"Just in time for tea, Mr. Lydell!" she smiled. "Sir Edgar has taken the other ladies for a nine-miles' ride down those sloughs of lanes, but Alberta and I expect them back exhausted any moment now."

Then her ladyship glided in.

"Ah, Mr. Lydell! I thought you could never have the heart to stay away from those birds so long as you wished us to believe!"

"It is not the sport here that has made London hateful to me," he rejoined, gravely; the while his steady gaze rested upon Aubrey, and he thought he knew the reason her color was varying from crimson to white.

"I hardly dare ask what it may be after the tragedy of that tone!" my lady declared, lightly.

"It is not exactly a tale with which to entertain a lady; but I should like to tell it if I might?"

"Oh, certainly! We will brace our nerves heroically—won't we, Aubrey?"

"I told Miss Attison my trip to town was to meet an old college-chum—George Skipworth. He went to Australia a year or two ago to make a fortune, as so many fancy is an easy matter there; and he wanted it for the old reason—to share with another. He was engaged to some young lady, who had a mind above love in a cottage."

My lady laughed, as she stooped to caress the cat.

"By a rare stroke of luck, such as does not fall to one in twenty out there, he did pick up, not a fortune, but enough to justify him in returning to the girl who had sent him out with the promise to wait for him; and can you guess how she welcomed him—how she repaid the exile and toil to which he had devoted himself at her command, endured unflinchingly for her sake alone?"

He paused, covering his face with his hand; then added, bitterly, hoarsely, "I saw him yesterday lying dead before me, shot through the heart by his own hand; and a few lines by his side, to tell the cause of that self-murder—to tell the poor old father, whose only child he was, how a false woman's cruelty"—and even my lady shrunk at that ringing sternness—"had driven his son mad; ruined him body and soul, as he put it; but to her name he left no clew—loyal, even in death, to the creature who had slain him as surely as if her finger had pulled that fatal trigger."

My lady turned aside, affected. Aubrey made the first sound she had uttered since Lydell began to speak. It was more of a wail than a cry, and the young man started forward to catch her, as she sunk, half-fainting, from her chair.

"My smelling-bottle—thanks!—and a little cold water. She will be well again presently. She is subject to fainting, and you did tell it very suddenly, you know—such a *terrible* thing!" my lady reproached him. "There, are you better now, dear? It was only a horrible tale, Aubrey, such as you may read in the newspapers any day, if you look."

Then, as consciousness came back to Aubrey, and she opened her lips to speak, with a sign and a whisper, her cousin banished Max Lydell from the room.

CHAPTER V.
A PHOTOGRAPH.

PERRIMAN HALL was as full and as gay as ever. Some of the former guests had left, but others had taken their places.

Max Lydell had insisted upon taking up his abode in his own house, unfinished though it was; and Major Macarthy, with his hopes blighted by Aubrey's firm though kindly answer to the question he had dared at last to put, had returned to his regiment, and was already forgetting the wound he had declared to be incurable.

Captain Fusell had gone to Paris; but Miss Attison, with one or two more of the first comers, was still at the Hall.

Lady Perriman was more lively, more bewitching than ever, though she had given up her plots for Aubrey's matrimonial welfare, and apparently resigned herself to her cousin's determination to carry out her father's will.

Miss Attison had received another letter from that ardent lover across the water—an epistle abounding in sentiment and professions, and containing the comforting assurance that he would be by her side early in the new year—an epistle that jarred on the delicate sensitiveness that tried so hard to ignore the vulgarity and want of gentlemanly feeling shown in each line of that letter.

Poor Aubrey! Life was not very bright to her just then. The future looked darker than the present, and the present had few sunbeams and many shadows.

The cousin whom she had loved as a sister had proved herself heartless and cruel, while the man whom she had believed a steadfast model of honor and integrity had shown himself mean and false.

Aubrey's offer of friendship, and Max Lydell's grateful acceptance of it, had ended in a coldness on his side so marked as to be noticed by every one; and mean, indeed, did it seem to her of the man who had spared no effort to overcome her aversion and compel her to like him, that he should, the moment he fancied his end achieved, turn the tables upon herself, and wound her with the very weapons of which he had disarmed her.

How bitterly she repented that conversation in the Bolton lanes only she could know. To have been cajoled into owning herself defeated, and offering overtures to the foe who laughed in his sleeve as he pretended to accept them, and who, immediately her humiliation is gained, throws off his mask and shows how he scorns her weakness, was a hard remembrance.

Perriman Hall has grown hateful to her; for, go where she will, she meets the handsome young bachelor whom half the girls in the neighborhood are anxious to encounter; and knows that as he spoke of her to his friend in the Albert Hall, so does he think of her now.

She hated him then. How much better might it have been for her if she had heard no other words from his lips than those she so long resented!

Miss Attison had no true home to retire to—the nearest approach to a home since her father's death was Perriman Hall; but as that place and its associations had become unbearable, she had accepted an invitation to Brighton for Christmas, and after a month spent there, would go north to pay a long-promised visit to Laura Rogers, an old schoolmate.

"I know how you love riding," said Laura Rogers, a few mornings after Aubrey's arrival. "The horses shall be round at eleven, and we will have such a scamper together!"

They did have a scamper, over moors and commons and through many lanes; and when pacing slowly up-hill to give the horses time to breathe, passed a small house, so curiously built and so picturesquely surrounded, that Aubrey asked, "Who lives in that romantic little spot, Laura?"

"Oh! one of the curiosities of the neighborhood; such an odd, gloomy, unsociable old man! I'll take you to visit him some day, if you like oddities. But I pity old Skipworth, too, for the shock that made him so queer was

the sudden death of his only son, whom he nearly worshiped. He had been abroad, young George Skipworth, and died in some dreadful manner—I'm not sure that he was not murdered. I know this old man is always vowing vengeance upon the somebody who caused his death. There he is at the window! Look, Aubrey! Why, what an awful expression he has got! Do you think he is in a fit?"

It nearly chilled Aubrey's blood that face at the glass, more especially as the sunken, glowering eyes, with, as Laura said, their awful expression, seemed to pass over Miss Rogers to rest on herself alone.

"There is insanity in his family, I know," whispered Laura, as involuntarily she touched her horse's side with her whip; "and I should not wonder if brooding over his trouble is not sending old Skipworth mad. I am sure I shall be afraid to go near him now."

Not till long after the fair girls had swept out of sight did that old man move from his posture and gaze, then he went slowly across to a cabinet that was locked, and from its secret drawer took a locket that had evidently belonged to a gentleman's watch-chain.

Slowly he opened it, and gazed at the tress of auburn hair and photograph it surrounded.

A pictured face, lovely in its perfect outline, with features and eyes that any glance might take for Aubrey's own—that every glance that did not know by heart the sweet, candid expression alone wanting would so take. And old Skipworth, lonely, imbibited, and half crazed, muttered, as he reclosed the spring and replaced the trinket, "I should know that face among a hundred, and I have seen it at last!"

The two girls were very near home, when Miss Rogers began to fidget, and color, and answer her companion in the most astoundingly irrelevant manner, as swift-trotting hoofs were heard gaining upon them.

"Mr. Edwardes?" then Laura whispered, all in a flutter; "and, I expect, Mr. Lydell. Yes. Let me introduce you to my friend, Miss Attison!"

She turned to the two gentlemen reining in at her side, and then, either from Miss Rogers's agitation, or Mr. Edwardes's maneuvers, or from the fact that in absence of mind one is sure to do the exact thing one wishes to avoid, Aubrey found herself by Max Lydell's side, turning down the narrow lane that would only admit of two abreast, and she thought, "Is this fate?"

"Is this your first visit to this county, Miss Attison?" Mr. Lydell began, interestingly, and with no symptom of embarrassment in his easy manner—the exact manner Aubrey flattered herself she had forgotten, and knew now, in this startled moment, she could never forget.

"My very first. I have been coming to stay with Laura ever since we left school, and never actually arrived here until last week. It is very surprising, though, to meet you in this neighborhood!"

"I have the same right here as yourself," he laughed; "that of a visitor. I have been staying with Edwardes for a week now—no, ten days. I know you like exactness."

"On so important a matter, yes."

"Ah! you have not forgotten how to be sarcastic. I have been fearful, once or twice during our separation, that, deprived of the constant practice I afforded you, you might insensibly lose some of your talent in that line."

"How relieved you must be to find such an awful fear groundless; though, had it been realized, I dare say I could soon have regained lost skill under so consummate a master of the art as yourself."

"You flatter me!" he said, quietly.

"Do you intend to stay long here? Do your friends live very near the Rogers's?"

"Within a mile; and as to the length of my visit, my own place is so uncomfortable just now, that I am glad to burden my friends."

Then, as Mr. Rogers's gate was reached, the equestrians in front caused a stoppage.

Laura, still with a becoming color and fair

amount of confusion, told her friend most interesting secrets about Mr. Edwardes during the privacy of a luncheon toilet; then went on in a more collected way to announce—"Mr. Lydell would be the exact match for you, Aubrey. He has often stayed at the Edwardes's house before, and I have always had that idea in my mind. You seem a couple just made for each other."

"Is it fate," again wondered poor Aubrey, "that re-issues Alberta's words from Laura's lips in this weary way? How can people be so blind as to make such egregious mistakes?"

Laura knew nothing as yet of Mr. Grey, or Aubrey's engagement; and Aubrey hardly felt equal to making the confidence just then, especially as it could only be a half-confidence; for how could she, by telling her real reason for giving that promise, betray her dead father's misdeeds? Besides, it would be to revive all the endless unsatisfactory arguments she had suffered at Alberta's hands, and which would be certain to repeat themselves at Laura's.

"It would be time enough when Philip Grey appeared in England for the fact of her engagement to announce itself," she decided; and, in the tumult of such decision, answered Miss Rogers, sharply: "You are very kind, Laura, but of all the unlikely things that have ever entered into your head, this is the climax."

"I don't see that at all!" eagerly. "You will be thrown together capitally here. Mr. Edwardes is such a great friend of—of papa's, is running in and out here constantly; and, of course, Mr. Lydell, too, comes a great deal; and you know people say—and I believe it—only opportunities are wanted for that kind of thing."

"No inclination?" questioned the other, dryly. "Well, Mr. Lydell's and my opportunities are things of the past, for I have known him intimately for some months now. He lives close to my cousin's."

Nothing disconcerted Laura.

"So much the better. You have got a start."

"Yes, we have," says Miss Attison; "a start of mutual dislike."

The opportunities came, surely enough. Mr. Lydell and Mr. Edwardes were invited to dinner; Mr. Edwardes and his friend dropped in to luncheon; meetings on horseback multiplied themselves; there were social gatherings at houses in the neighborhood; now and then a dinner party; occasionally a dance; and at dinner, if fate decreed Max Lydell's seat beside Aubrey, their conversation might have edified the room generally. At luncheon he was civility personified and coldness; out of doors, easy, indifferent, gentlemanly.

In a friendly drawing-room his attentions belonged to the plainest girl or the most elderly dowager, rather than to the belle, Miss Attison; and at a dance he averted remark by asking her hand for one set of "Lancers;" and there were plenty of other good dancers present only too anxious to valse with so perfect a step as Aubrey's.

She did not flirt with others before his eyes, as a less scrupulous girl might have done. She was not the woman to run the risk of wounding one set of feelings for the chance of touching another.

She talked and laughed, and apparently enjoyed herself, while all the time there ran that undecurrent through her merriest thoughts—"Is it fate that, in the very effort I made to avoid him, has thrown this man across my path again?"

"This is old Skipworth we are about to meet," Miss Rogers announced, in a trepidation she was somewhat ashamed of, as she and Aubrey were walking home from the village of Ling. "I hope he won't want to stop and speak."

Vain hope. The old man bowed, shook hands, and, after a few old-fashioned compliments to Laura, begged for an introduction to her friend.

"Yours is an acquaintance I make gladly, Miss Attison," he said, in a strange though per-

fectedly gentlemanly manner; "as I should that of any friend of my poor boy's—and you were that, were you not?"

"I knew Mr. George Skipworth, though but slightly," faltered Aubrey.

"Slightly—ah! exactly. Before he went abroad, perhaps. But you saw him on his return, surely?"

"Once, for a few moments only," she owned, uneasy under those curiously fixed glittering eyes, and wondering how much this questioner knew or guessed of her cousin's share in the cruel bereavement of his old age.

"He was my only son, Miss Attison—a son who never caused me one painful thought or one uneasy moment until—Perhaps you don't know the particulars of his death?" he broke off abruptly to question with that strange gaze growing wilder.

"Yes, I heard them"—with a shudder.

Then he turned abruptly away, muttering to himself, leaving the young ladies there without bow or good-by; and Laura protested that he must be going crazy, and wondered Aubrey had never mentioned her acquaintanceship with George Skipworth before, asking many questions about it now, and about the particulars of the death whose very remembrance so affected his father; and Aubrey parried those questions as best she might.

Miss Attison thought very pitifully of that desolate, bitter old man—very pitifully of the loneliness and suffering one so near to herself had caused.

"I would give anything to be able to comfort him," she pondered, standing in the early gloaming of a windy afternoon at the corner, where two ways led from the village to Fairview, the Rogers's house—one the longer and the high-road, the other the narrow lane passing old Skipworth's cottage and garden.

That garden was as remarkable as the building itself. It ran along a steeply ascending bank, which, beginning on the level with, ultimately towered high above the lane itself; and instead of having any hedge, was bordered by a curious wall of loose, rugged stones, which the owner asserted were as safely put together as the walls of his house, but which skeptical passers by were wont to declare looked ready, with the merest suggestion of a shake, to descend on unlucky heads below.

"If I thought I could comfort him ever so little, or if I were sure my visit would not be deemed an intrusion, I would go and see him this afternoon," Aubrey continued, still standing with the basket she had taken out laden to a poor woman in the village, empty in her hand. "But he might resent my sympathy—might resent myself, indeed, as so near a relative of hers; and, if he did, I should do harm rather than good, and open the wounds I would give anything for power to heal. He said the other day that he was glad to make my acquaintance; but, as he said it, his look curdled my very blood. Is he mad, I wonder? Dare I go?"

A slight sound behind her caused her to turn sharply, and see some one regarding her—some one who, after a vault over the gate from the neighboring copse, had paused to observe how becoming was hesitation to Miss Attison.

With the wind blowing loose her auburn hair, and making fine frolic among the long fur bordering her jacket; with the brighter tint given by exercise and air to her cheeks, and her sweet eyes thoughtful and soft in their perplexed pity, Aubrey was a prettier picture than she believed, as she turned to exclaim, with a smile, "How you startled me, Mr. Lydell! Where have you sprung from?"

"From doing a little farming for Edwardes, who was otherwise engaged," he smiled, in reply. "And where are you going, may I ask, that requires either such thoughtful preparation or such lengthy deliberation?"

"It takes both," she agreed, with a little sigh. "I was trying to summon courage to pay old Mr. Skipworth a visit."

Max was startled.

"Why on earth were you going to do that?"

She colored a little.

"I don't know. I dare say I could do him no good; but it seems so sad for him to be living there day after day, with no creature to speak to—no one to divert his thoughts from brooding over his trouble."

"That idea has just struck you?"

And the satire of the tone was so nearly akin to rudeness, that she turned haughtily away with a bow.

He overtook her in one stride.

"I have no right to offer advice, and don't suppose it will be taken; nevertheless, I do presume, as much for your sake as for the poor old man's peace of mind, to protest against this rash idea of yours."

"You go to see him occasionally, do you not?"

"That is hardly a case in point."

"I cannot see that there is much difference."

She is not looking at him, so is unconscious of the glance he gives her ere replying.

"I am a man—you a lady; besides which, I have known him since I was a boy, and"—with a sudden repression in the tone—"I was poor George's friend."

"Well," she said, in assumed indifference, I think I must postpone it till to-morrow; that is all. All this argument has made it too late for any visit to-day."

"Much too late for you to be alone in these lanes," he agreed, calmly turning by her side.

She was vexed beyond measure.

"I beg you will not come so far out of your way. I am often out much later than this, and should never dream of being afraid, I assure you"—more hotly. "I would much rather go home by myself—ininitely rather."

"Then I will leave you at the end of this road. Is the news correct I heard to-day?" he went on, pleasantly ignoring the extra erectness of the well-carried little head he glanced down upon.

"Most likely not. News seldom is."

"Still, I am tempted to credit this from personal observation. Miss Rogers's engagement to Edwardes?"

"Oh, that is correct enough—yes. It was settled last evening. Dear Laura, I am so glad—unselfishly so, considering my lonely plight this afternoon, don't you think?"

She laughed, and was her sunny self again.

"No doubt Miss Rogers will act as considerately by you some day. When will that happy some day be?"

And his quiet eyes were on her face as he uttered the light words.

"Perhaps it has already been. Perhaps it is now."

With her glance clear and upraised straight to his, even in the fading light, she saw the flash that went over his face—saw it fade even as it had come, and leave him paler, perhaps, but that was difficult to determine in uncertain dusk—and with his quiet, cynical voice giving the lie utterly to whatever sudden loss of control was responsible for that fleeting expression.

Was it surprise, that flash? consternation? jealousy? pain? It might be either—it might be none of these. Far less likely either than none, the girl thought bitterly as he asked, "Am I to understand, then, that I may offer you also congratulations?"

"I am engaged. I have been for a long time," she answered, simply. "Would you like—would you care to hear all about it?"

He bent his head, and she heard him draw a long breath hard. Then she nerved herself for the effort, and told the whole story she knew it would have been so much better to have told long ago, and he listened without comment or flagging attention to the end.

They had passed, without noticing it, Mr. Skipworth's cottage, and were walking under the shadow of his garden bank. Aubrey's voice was too low for any listener to catch her words, and old Skipworth's ears were dull; but watching from behind that sheltering wall, he saw with the keen sight age had failed to dim, what Aubrey was unconscious of—the earnest-

ness of the steadfast gaze bent upon her, the breathless absorption in which her companion drank in her every syllable.

"Witching him with her cursed wiles, now she is!" he muttered beneath his breath; "and making merry over his death next she will be! He was my boy's friend—the only human being whose face I have cared to see, since—since— Vile sorceress—murderess!"

He broke off, his lips working, his hands clenched in rising frenzy.

"Shall another noble life be sacrificed to your deviltry, when one effort of this feeble old arm can save him? One effort!" he muttered, and crept on with a rapidity one would scarcely expect to the highest point of the bank—the furthest limit of his wall, behind which he waited for those figures sauntering beneath.

"One effort, and your cursed enchantment is at an end. No more lives at your door! It is the kindest thing I can do for you, madam. One effort!"

Nearer, through the twilight, came the figures—firmer Skipworth grasped the rugged stone his tottering arms could scarcely wield. Inch by inch he raised it, crouching behind its companions. Then Aubrey felt herself whirled round suddenly in Lydell's arms, and her scream, as the missile came crashing down, was music to the old man's ears above.

Until a few hasty steps had put them completely out of danger, Aubrey, pale and trembling, was as silent as her companion, then she whispered, thankfully, "What a merciful escape! Did you see that stone falling?"

"I heard it, I think, as it began to roll. Excuse my handling you so roughly. There was no time for speech."

His voice sounded faint—his face, as Aubrey glanced up, was deadly white. He unconsciously grasped her arm, in an attempt to steady himself, then reeled and fell, and the girl, kneeling by his side, with the stunned pain at her heart whispered, "Can this be death?" made no outcry, but rapidly felt in the pocket of his shooting-coat and found, as she had hoped, a small flask, and poured some of its contents between his lips.

"You are hurt, I fear?" she said, as the dark gray eyes met hers again.

"This is very weak of me," he returned, in a man's scorn of physical helplessness. "It is only my arm—broken, I fancy. I shall be all right after a little more brandy."

He swallowed the little more brandy, and rose to pursue his way, with Aubrey's anxious eyes on his white lips and their repression of pain.

"You are suffering fearfully, I know," she remarked, in a constrained kind of way. "I don't think you will be able to walk home. If you would turn back into Mr. Skipworth's, I could run to your place, and order a carriage, in less than twenty minutes."

"Not for worlds!" he replied, stiffly. "I should never dream of putting you to such outrageous trouble. I shall be all right as long as the brandy holds out."

"The stone caught you instead of me."

"Only my arm."

"I wish it had been mine!"

And the wild crimson surging at the impulsive utterance of those unguarded words flooded hotter and hotter at the sudden passion of his rejoinder.

"Yours! I would not have you suffering this pain!"

Then he checked himself abruptly, and his next remark, about the damages he would claim from old Skipworth, and his unsafe style of building, was made laughingly in his usual style.

"Go on, please, Miss Attison, with the narrative this little episode interrupted," he continued, after a pause. "I was getting deeply interested. When do you say this Grey-lucky man—is coming over to claim you?"

"He is on his way now," faintly.

"How anxiously you must anticipate his arrival! But of course you have made his

acquaintance to some extent already by letter."

"Yes."

And Aubrey's thoughts went miserably back to those three letters, and their coarse, doubtful style.

"The temptation has never once crossed you to disobey your father's commands, I suppose?"

"It was not papa's commands; it was my own promise," she said, simply. And he was silent, thinking, was she false, this girl with clear, unfaltering eyes, and brave, sweet voice? Was it filial obedience and honor that held her to that detestable engagement with a man she had never seen, and of whom his quick perception told him she had formed, as yet, no favorable impression, or was it love for the gold she must sacrifice if she failed to sacrifice herself, that bound her to the wretched contract?

The latter, he fancied; and Aubrey's glance noted the hardening expression the fancy brought.

"You are in terrible pain, I know."

But it was too dark for him to see the suspicious moisture of the blue eyes.

"If you would only let me run to the doctor's or somewhere!"

"And leave me in the lurch? Listen! Don't I hear wheels this way at last?"

A gamekeeper's cart it proved to be, and Lydell consented to accept its aid, on condition that they drove round by Fairview, and deposited Miss Attison safely at home before proceeding to the nearest surgeon's.

As they neared Fairview, and Lydell reiterated his thanks for Aubrey's kindly attentions and consideration, she took her courage in both hands and faltered, "Don't think me so ungrateful as I seem, please. If I have not thanked you as I ought for what you have done for me, I am none the less conscious that you saved my life at risk of your own."

"Nothing of the sort!" he proceeded at once to snub her. "I am very glad I chanced to be quick enough, but I assure you I did nothing more than would have been my duty to do; nothing more than I should have been happy to do for any fellow-creature."

And in the face of that general philanthropy, Aubrey descended at Mrs. Rogers's gate.

CHAPTER VI.

SKIPWORTH'S REVENGE.

THERE came to Miss Attison the excuse to shorten her visit at Fairview, of which she had been earnestly desirous since her first ride out with Miss Rogers.

It came in a letter from Lady Perriman, declaring her ladyship so ill as to require her cousin's immediate return, and Aubrey made her excuses to her friends, with the consolatory promise to return and finish her visit before summer arrived.

"When Max Lydell is at his own place I will come back here," was the thought prompting such promise.

Miss Rogers herself drove her friend to the station, and on the way they encountered Mr. Lydell, with his arm in a sling. It was the first time Aubrey had seen him since the afternoon of the accident.

"Now, part friends, you two," pleaded Laura. "Don't be rude the very day you are going to leave him, and the poor fellow looking so pale."

"We have not time to stop, Laura. We shall lose the train, I'm sure. Laura, if you love me," in excited intensity, as the other turned to wonder and argue, "drive straight past, I implore!"

Overpowered by Aubrey's earnestness, and the strong hand she stretched toward the reins, Miss Rogers kept the pony at its fast trot, and Mr. Lydell and the ladies exchanged but a bow.

Laura was not, as a rule, renowned for tact; but that morning, after a swift glance at her companion's face, she forbore railing or question concerning Aubrey's peculiar conduct.

"You will have a friend in the train," she announced, standing at the door of Aubrey's carriage, while the engine puffed and waited;—"no less a person than old Mr. Skipworth. I never knew he traveled before. Would you like him in here?"—mischievously. He is only two carriages behind. I can bring him in one moment, if you like, and you can scold him about that dangerous wall of his, which I always knew would tumble down upon somebody, sooner or later."

Aubrey smiled and shook her head as the train moved off.

It was a tedious journey, and Miss Attison forgot all about the occupant of the carriage behind long before she had reached Perriman; therefore was her surprise great to behold in the only passenger besides herself alighting on that insignificant platform none other than Mr. Skipworth, and somehow the sight caused her uneasiness as well as surprise.

Why should he be there? What could his errand be? Was he following herself?—(with an uncomfortable creep)—or had he come to see Alberta?—and, if so, for what?

"How pale you look, Aubrey!" cried my lady's laughing voice. "I think my invalidism must have devolved upon you."

"You here to meet me!" responded Aubrey, amazed. "Why, I thought you were very ill?"

"So I was—for one day. Quite long enough for an excuse to get you back again, you see. The Hall was empty, and I can't stand a matrimonial *tete-a-tete* for long, as you know. Jump in, dear; these little animals won't stand a minute. Oh, bother it! I've dropped my letter. James!"—she turned to her servant.

But a courteous old gentleman emerging through the station swing-door had picked up the crested envelope, and approached, with his keen eyes scanning its address.

"I am going into the village. May I put this into the post for you?" he said, raising his hat, and addressing Aubrey; then he caught sight of her ladyship, and stood as if transformed to stone.

If the miniature tiger had lost one atom of his control over those fidgety little grays, either her ladyship or the stranger must inevitably have been upset.

"Is he mad?" whispered Alberta, testily.

But Mr. Skipworth recovered himself.

"Excuse the apparent curiosity of the inquiry, Miss Attison; but is this handwriting yours or your sister's?" he asked, abruptly, indicating that on the letter in his hand, while those restless eyes of his were roving from one beautiful face to the other.

"Neither," smiled my lady, amused. "It is mine."

"You are not, then, this lady's sister! But the likeness is so extraordinary, I am bewildered!"

He turned quickly to Alberta.

"Your name, surely, must be Attison?"

"Lady Perriman, at your service—*nee* Alberta Attison," she laughed, the whim taking her to find amusement in that old man, and unheedful of her cousin's pressure of her arm, and whisper, "Don't talk to him, Alberta! Oh, do drive on!"

"I am most grateful for the information you have given me," old Skipworth said, with a bow so low that his eyes were hidden. "Alberta! A charming name—a most remarkable name! I was gratified to make your companion's acquaintance a few days ago; I am a hundred times more delighted at making yours! Very like—very like indeed you are, ladies!"—lifting his searching glance again;—and her ladyship, tired of the novelty, carelessly waved him aside.

"But I see the difference distinctly now; it lies in expression. Once again let me thank you for your obliging candor!"—raising his voice as the ponies dart forward. "It has saved me from an irreparable mistake!" he thought and muttered to himself in his slow walk to the village. "Have you forgotten another letter you wrote with that same hand, my lady—a letter which, stained

with the life-blood of the heart it rested on, is here on mine to demand its vengeance?"

"I admire the style of acquaintance you've been picking up in the north, Aubrey," said my lady, languidly. "It has the charm of peculiarity, at any rate."

"Alberta, I'm horribly frightened!" Miss Attison's voice startled her cousin. "That old man you talked to in that way was poor George Skipworth's father."

My lady gave the off pony so sudden a lash that an old man breaking stones in the road had hard work to avoid the bounding carriage, and solemnly prophesied a smash before her ladyship reached home.

"I wish you had not told him your *farmer* name," sighed Aubrey.

"I don't see why I should disown myself because you've happened to make acquaintance with Mr. Skipworth, senior. How did you do it, Aubrey?"

Aubrey related her introduction, and the old man's peculiarities and morbid temperament.

"Why should he come down *here*?" she questioned, fearfully.

"Doubtless you have bewitched him," was the careless reply; "and he might have made you an offer just now if my unfortunate apparition had not bewildered him. I trust he won't transfer his affections from you to me—that is all. I'm afraid he was a little struck by my superior beauty; but after all the son's affection has cost me, I should not care about captivating the father."

"Oh, Alberta! how can you dare"—in a tone of deep feeling—"to joke on that subject?"

"We will change it then. What is the latest from your Grey fate?"

"I can bear nothing more till he arrives in England, which may be very soon now," she answered, unhesitatingly, but with her head turned away.

"He is really on his way home?"

"Yes; in the Swallow."

"To claim you in person. With what rapture you will deliver yourself to his keeping! What is this I hear about Max Lydell! He has been saving your life, or you have been endangering his."

Aubrey described the incident in the most natural tone in the world, and her ladyship had only time to remark that old Skipworth seemed an undesirable sort of neighbor, and she trusted he had not come down to Perriman to introduce his peculiar system of wall building, ere they dashed up the Hall's approach.

Some days passed on, and Aubrey was thinking neither of old Skipworth nor her cousin, as she walked slowly, and alone, down the road skirting the home plantation, and leading alike from the village and station.

She had been visiting some of her village pensioners, an errand on which my lady invariably declined to accompany her, and was rather later than she had intended to be in returning.

As she passed the spot where, stretched in such anguish, she last saw the unfortunate George Skipworth, she could not refrain from the shuddering glance she always gave it, and—was it fancy, or did she really see a form there now?

Her heart almost stopped its beating as clearly a longer glance told her it was no fancy conjured up by morbid memory, but a human being, half-hidden in its crouching attitude, by the trees' dark shadows and the long grass.

In the fascination of terror she gazed till the figure made a movement. Its head was raised as if in observance of herself; and distinctly, as the light caught it, did she recognize the white hair and harsh features of the man she had not seen since the encounter at the station—the father of him whom Alberta, on that very spot, taunted almost to his death.

Distinctly, as his head sunk again, did she see another motion—his white hand lowered, and the something it held; then fear gave

wings to her feet, and she darted past, and hardly paused until the Hall steps were gained.

"Is Lady Perriman in the drawing-room?" she asked the butler opening the door.

"No, miss; her ladyship isn't yet returned."

"Returned! Where from?"

"She drove Sir Edgar to the station, an hour ago, I should say it was, miss. He was telegraphed for up to London, I believe."

And the man, well-trained though he was, stared in surprise at the way his news affected his hearer.

In a second, without pause or thought, Aubrey was flying to retrace her steps, in no alarm at Sir Edgar's telegram, which she knew well referred but to some scientific dinner or ponderous meeting, but in the thought, "Alberta must pass that pistol!" and the impulsive certainty that for Lady Perriman's return it was old Skipworth was crouching and waiting.

Clearly on the evening air as the girl ran she heard the wheels of the little carriage, and the pony's hoofs and bells.

Nearer and faster they came; longer seemed the road, and slower her feet.

Oh, for power to warn Alberta! Oh, for anything to stay that carriage but for a minute!

On she flew. She could see the spot; she could see the pony!

With what breath she had she essayed a shout, waving her handkerchief the while, and—"Bang!"—there was the shot, and Alberta retaining unhurt her seat and reins as the startled pony swerved aside, to dash full speed across the park.

Aubrey strained her eyes, after that mad rush over the uneven grass, between the scattered trees, and among the stumps and roots.

Her ladyship's nerve was perfect, and the carriage strong. Twenty times did they escape, and at the twenty-first there came a stumble, a crash, and Lady Perriman was thrown with terrific force to the ground.

CHAPTER VII.

HER OWN LOVER.

SAD days for Miss Attison while her cousin lay unconscious of her imminent danger, and Sir Edgar fidgeted and bemoaned, questioning, and ordering, and worrying, albeit grieving truly for the beautiful wife whose life hung in a balance.

All that money could give, Sir Edgar provided; all that care and love could lavish, Aubrey bestowed; and inch by inch youth and strength gained the mastery, and the lips of the famous conclave of London physicians pronounced at last my lady out of danger—and a cripple for life. Never to walk—never to stand upright again!

But in the sad days before it was known that even such a half-life would be spared, Aubrey, hanging hour after hour over that couch, in the expectation that each one might be its occupant's last, paid little heed to the reports and surmises as to who had fired that fatal shot, which, heard at the Hall, was known to have been the thing that frightened the pony.

Did she heed, she would not grant the information she was capable of giving, for the certainty that Alberta had earned her punishment—that, severe as it was, it was but, humanly speaking, retribution for her own cruelty—was the sharpest point of loving Aubrey's sorrow.

Never glancing at the papers, she knew nothing of the Swallow's officially announced arrival; and a letter from Laura Rogers, which, after pages of horror at her ladyship's accident, went on to say, "You remember old Mr. Skipworth traveling in your train? Well, he has just come back as suddenly as he left home, and is so unmistakably insane now—violently so, not harmlessly peculiar as he was before—that the Commissioner of Lunacy, or some such person, has ordered his removal to an asylum, and there he is going, or gone"—this did but

elicit another of the sighs so much more natural to Aubrey just then than the smiles her face seemed made for.

But the day before my lady was announced out of danger, a casual observation from somebody about Mr. Lydell's having returned home at last penetrated Aubrey's preoccupation. And the afternoon of that same day, when a whispered message was brought to her in the invalid's chamber, that a gentleman was waiting in the drawing-room to see her—a gentleman who would take no denial, but promised not to detain her long—a great flush came to the cheek that confinement and anxiety had made so pale; and the girl, hastily signing to the nurse to take her place, obeyed the summons, without reflecting that the servant would have recognized Mr. Lydell and given his name had the visitor been he.

She did not reflect; she only felt; and her breath was quick, her hand trembling, as she entered the drawing-room, to confront—a stranger.

He was a tall, dark, flashily-dressed man, with ungentlemanly hands and too much jewelry; and he did not attempt to repress the start of admiration the girl's appearance elicited.

Aubrey bowed, and hated herself for that quick throb of disappointment. Then she drew back her hand haughtily as the stranger advanced to possess himself of it in a confident and familiar manner.

"You didn't seem to be expecting me; but you got my letter this morning surely?" he stopped, rather taken aback.

"Your letter? I am not aware."

"What, you don't know me! Come now, that's too good a joke!" and the sound of his own laugh successfully reinstated him in his own opinion. "That dunder-headed footman made a blunder over my name, I suppose, though it isn't such a difficult one to catch, either. Your humble servant, P. M. Grey, my dear Aubrey," and, smiling in her face, he again made a dive for the diamond-flashing hand.

She gave him her hand, and stood the shock, drawing aside, however, in a manner he could not mistake, from the endearments he would fain proceed with; and then she seated herself in a mechanical, dazed kind of way at some little distance from the chair to which she motioned her lover.

Her lover! The man she was pledged to marry! The man by whose side and under whose guardianship the remainder of her life should be passed!

Those three sentences turned themselves over, and rung themselves together, and burned themselves into Aubrey's brain the while she smiled upon him, and answered monosyllably his flow of talk.

Anything but vulgarity, she told herself, she could have learned in time to endure. From that her innate soul revolted; and that man, alas! was more wholly vulgar, more utterly devoid of all pretensions to the title gentleman, than his letters had prepared her for.

He was loud, confident, coarse, and would be very lover-like if the fair one were not so deucedly high and mighty, as he informed himself—so confoundedly cold to a fellow, as he hinted to her.

"I should have been down here yesterday if that blooming lawyer of yours hadn't delayed me, but I wrote to you directly I got to London, and I made sure it was the right address."

"I have had scarcely time to notice my letters the last day or two; my cousin, Lady Perriman, is so dangerously ill," the girl faltered.

"But my writing. I should have thought you would have known that, anyhow," in an injured tone.

"Doubtless, if my thoughts had been less engrossed, I should have done."

He stared at her boldly awhile, studying, in satisfaction, and without ceremony, her rare beauty of feature and form, then broke forth

admiringly, "'Pon my word, my dear, your photo does not do you justice not by one half—no, nor a quarter. I was regularly knocked backwards when you came in just now—knocked over, as they say, with amazement. Of course I thought the likeness a very pretty girl, and me a lucky dog to get hold of such a one. But the original"—leaning forward for another tender capture—"is as superior as light to dark—out and out superior—coloring, style, everything."

Aubrey was but human, and despite the honorable resolutions with which her mind was made up, and which she was nobly trying to bring now to the fore, she could not help shrinking from that touch, and the coarse leer of the face so near her own.

Mr. Grey's physiognomy was not improved by an expression of marked displeasure.

"Dash it all, I say, Aubrey, you are cool—devilish cool and stiff!"

"I beg your pardon," she began, trying with might and main to aid duty and vanquish inclination. "I don't think I am quite myself to-day; the anxiety and distress of my cousin's illness have been so great, and her state is so critical to-day."

"Of course, I'm very sorry for her ladyship's illness," he interrupted, ungenerously pressing his advantage—"shocked, and all that; but I can't say that I see that is excuse enough for your treating a fellow so precious coldly and off-hand—a fellow, too, who has just come such a long journey—and a beast of a one we had!—at your express invitation, Miss Attison."

"You must excuse it all, please," she pleaded, with her lovely eyes raised for the first time to his. "Your coming has been so sudden and unexpected; and, as I said, I am nervous, ill, to-day. I hope next time you see me you will be better satisfied."

"You ain't going to dismiss me like this?" he complained, taking the hint her rising and glance toward the door were intended to give. "Of course, with illness in the house, I don't expect, as I otherwise should, to be asked to regularly stay; but just for the day, you know. We have such lots to talk over, you and me. What made your father repent so all of a sudden, and you fall into his views so agreeably; how singularly I chanced to first cast my eyes on that advertisement of your lawyer chap; and what a delight your first sweet letter was to me, what you thought of mine, and—"

"Will you step up-stairs, Miss Attison, as soon as possible?" her ladyship's maid asked, with a tap at the door.

And Aubrey turned piteously to her companion.

"You must excuse me now, please. I am afraid she is worse. I am very, very sorry to be so rude, but you see how it is."

"I suppose I must. Well, then, I tear myself away for the present, and the best thing I can do is to run back to town and hurry those slow coaches of lawyers on a bit—hasten things for the wedding as much as I can; for you'll let it be soon, won't you, sweet? Directly her ladyship's better, we will say."

"I can't decide anything about that to-day. I shall doubtless see you many times before then. Good-by."

He detained her hand.

"If you'll give me a measure, I can be getting the rings—the engaged one, anyhow—and bring it down next time I come. Have you got any fancy about the stones or pattern? Anything you suggest, you know."

"Oh, I leave it all to you!"—in a fever of impatience. "Choose what you like, Mr. Grey; I shall be sure to be satisfied; and, forgive me, I must go."

He would have taken her in his arms, but something in the proud, beautiful face withheld him; and contenting himself with oppressive kisses on the reluctant little hands, he let her go, and outside the Hall called himself a fool for his timidity; while Aubrey went back to her cousin's room with an additional weight added upon her heart, already too greatly overburdened.

CHAPTER VIII.

FREED AND REJECTED.

"Is Max Lydell at home, do you know?" Lady Perriman questioned from the sofa, to which the doctor had that day allowed her to be removed.

And Aubrey answered, "I think not. We were told he had returned a week or so ago, but it proved a false report."

Silence a little while; then my lady's feeble white fingers picked up her cousin's hand.

"Where did this new ring come from, Aubrey?"

With the questioning bright eyes full on hers. Aubrey attempted no equivocation; merely preluding, "You were too ill to be told it at the time, dear," she related her betrothed's visit, and subsequent present of that sign of betrothal.

My lady's perception was as keen as ever; and, though no word of Miss Attison's breathed disappointment or repulsion, none the less did her hearer fathom how fatally her own predictions of the style of man this Australian lover would prove had fulfilled themselves.

But, instead of triumph or teasing, she only murmured, with wistful pressure of the hand she held, "Darling, I am sorry!"

"Now for the old arguments, in renewed force!" Aubrey tried to laugh, lightly; but her ladyship shook her head.

"I'm beginning to see that it would take something infinitely more potent than words of mine to divert you from the straight course honor or duty point you out, and do not feel sure that I am not also beginning"—a pause; then she finished, with an effort—"to wish that, in the days I can never undo, my own steps had been a trifle straighter, or that I had paid better heed to your counsels, dear old mentor."

This was a great deal for my lady to say, and Aubrey bent tearfully to kiss the face, so pale and changed, that met hers, with a warmer caress than in those old days.

"I might have spared myself something, you are thinking, Aubrey," whispered my lady, mournfully; "but I don't see that I have much right to complain. I did not pay too much regard for other people's sufferings, you know; and, if ever a hand prepared its own punishment, mine did. I have had time to think all that over these long, quiet days, you see; and there dawns upon me sometimes the fancy that"—and the whisper sunk lower—"in the highest sense, you know, this affliction may be the best thing that could have overtaken me; only—only there is always the past. If suffering could undo that!"

There was a long pause, as the cousins sat with clasped hands; and Aubrey's heart was raised in hopefulness that that dark cloud of trial might indeed have the brightest of all linings for Alberta.

Then Lady Perriman said, slowly, "I want to see Max Lydell, though I am afraid it could do no good beyond relieving my own conscience. I must ask Edgar when he thinks him likely to return; and meanwhile, Aubrey"—with a dash of her old manner her cousin was glad to see—"when is Mr. Grey to favor you with another visit? I must be introduced to my inevitable cousin."

"You will have the chance before long, I have no doubt." Aubrey tried hard to make her tone as light as her words. "In fact, he fixed to come to-morrow, but I fancy there is some little hitch in the business part of the affair, which may prevent him; for I had a letter from Mr. Robins this morning, asking me to go up to his office, or proposing himself coming down here without delay, as it is imperative he should see me at once on a most important matter."

The girl imitated so exactly the precise little solicitor's tone and manner in that last sentence, that my lady laughed as she inquired, "Well, which are you going to do?"

"I'm not decided. Edgar hates Mr. Robins coming here, does not he? But I don't like the

idea of leaving you for a whole day, and it would take me nearly that, running up and down and discussing."

"Oh, nonsense!—it need not; and if it should, what matter? I can be left quite well to my own resources now."

And Aubrey thought how unlike Alberta that unselfish speech would have been a month ago.

Miss Attison went up to town the following morning, and found Mr. Robins in greater perturbation than she had ever deemed it possible he could evince.

He closed the door with much caution and suspicion of impossible eavesdroppers, and stirred the fire with so many ominous clearings of his throat, that the young lady became deeply impressed with the importance, though not one whit wiser as to the nature, of the matter she had been summoned to discuss.

"My dear young lady," Mr. Robins began at length, when procrastination would avail him no longer, "it is the most unpleasant thing I have to acquaint you with—a really, I must style it, humiliating confession for an old practitioner like myself to be obliged to make. But the long and short of it is, my dear Miss Attison, we have met the biggest rogue of our time rather late in our life, and he has outwitted us—outwitted us *pro tem.* that is to say. I flatter myself we are returning the compliment now—ha, ha!" rubbing his hands in a revived and congratulatory way.

"It is very astonishing to hear of your being outwitted, Mr. Robins," returned his client, politely. "But does it concern me particularly?"

"Unfortunately, it does. Unfortunately, my dear young lady, it does. Your estimable father's will, and his peculiar clauses in reference to yourself. I remonstrated with my late client upon those clauses, I assure you; but he was firm—firm and clear as he was upon all points.

"To give you the gist of the matter in a nutshell,"—the prosy old man suddenly changed his style, in view of his hearer's unconcealed impatience,—“the person who has represented himself as Philip Maximilian Grey, and, under your late father's will, the authorized claimant of your hand, who on such pretenses obtained an interview with you some short while ago, has been proved to us since unmistakably to be—the rankest impostor.”

The keen little man's eyes were fixed on his client, and twinkled as they beheld the effect of his words. Aubrey could have thrown her arms round his neck, and kissed the lips that had uttered open sesame to her fetters; or she could have whirled the prim little man in a mad valse round the dingy walls that had heard the words she scarcely dared believe.

She longed to do something wilder and more startling than her lady-like life had ever been guilty of; and though, by dint of great self-command, she subdued such longings and retained her seat and silence, her expressive face was easy for less sharp eyes to read than those of the solicitor, chuckling in relief, and proceeding to narrate the facts of the case as lately brought to light, and the cunning which had outwitted his own shrewdness.

Divested of legal phraseology and condensed, his narrative was as follows:

"Philip Grey, the man wronged by Mr. Attison, died when his son was but two years old; and this Aubrey's father knew, as also that Mrs. Grey and her son then changed their place of residence; but he seems to have been ignorant or careless of the fact that eight years later the mother married again, and that her boy accompanied herself and her second husband to England.

"She had only one child by her second husband, a boy, who died young, and upon his death the desolate father adopted little Philip Grey as his own, and from that time, at home and at school, the boy was far more generally known by his stepfather's surname than his own.

"On his stepfather's death, the young man,

in accordance with his will, succeeded to his name as well as his property.

"The first advertisement inserted by Mr. Robins in an Australian paper met by chance the eyes of a young man to whom it suggested at once the idea he so cleverly, in part, carried out—viz., to personate the Philip Grey sought for.

"Mr. Robins's first letter was a tempting bait—the heiress and her fortune, or the fortune without the heiress.

"Cunning as clever, and unscrupulous as cunning, Hughes craftily prepared his course by bribing and cajoling confederates, among whom was his mother, Mrs. Grey's old nurse and confidante.

"This woman happened to be in possession of several old letters and diaries of that lady's, which naturally proved invaluable for her son's present purpose, and Hughes managed to hoodwink the lawyer, whose eyes—though this Mr. Robins hinted not—might be rendered less keen and flaw-discerning by a natural desire to obtain the substantial legacy Mr. Attison had decreed his reward for successful discovery of Philip Grey.

"Rendered bolder and bolder by success, Hughes took his next step—came over to England, interviewed the lawyer, and visited his betrothed, trusting to his luck and daring to carry him safely over the very dangerous ground he now knew himself to be treading, and anxious to secure his bride and her gold with as much expedition and secrecy as possible, and retreat with them into safety abroad.

"But on his quitting Perriman Hall after the not wholly unsatisfactory interview he had held with Miss Attison—not wholly unsatisfactory, because if Aubrey should retract her promise, her money must still be his—his pleasant meditations were interrupted suddenly by the last man on earth he expected or wished to find himself face to face with—the man he was impersonating—the veritable Philip Grey.

What bold inventions and unscrupulous lies tided Hughes over such an apparently fatal encounter need not be detailed here; enough that the other's suspicions were more aroused than he permitted Hughes to perceive.

"He is an acquaintance of yours, the *bona fide* Philip Maximilian Grey, or Philip Maximilian Grey Lydell, as is his present title," Mr. Robins continued to his breathless listener; "and from some words of yours had gained an inkling of the imposture attempted.

"Mr. Lydell came straight up to us, and, after consultation, acted upon our advice in obtaining a private interview with the rascal Hughes, and dragging from him, by means of a little whip he already held over him, a full confession and renunciation of his impostures; and, to make a long matter short, my dear young lady, the affair is now as straight and clear as noonday.

"Mr. Lydell's identity is proved as incontrovertibly as Ralph Hughes's imposture. That latter gentleman is now in our hands, and his fate will be as you choose to decide it.

"Perhaps you will talk it over privately with Mr. Lydell, whom I am expecting every moment," glancing at his watch.

"I can stay no longer to-day," said Aubrey, rising as suddenly as if her seat had caught fire; but punctuality was too quick for her.

A clerk entered to announce Mr. Lydell; and Mr. Robins observed, as he hustled to the door, "Talk it over quietly between yourselves, Miss Attison, and favor me with your instructions on my return from a little pressing business in the next room."

The door closed, and among the scattered papers and musty books Aubrey and Max Lydell were left alone.

A man of the world and a woman of the world were they, however; and so, though the position for either was embarrassing as could well be possible, society's education was not at fault.

They shook hands calmly, and Miss Attison made pretty inquiries after Mr. Lydell's arm,

which she regretted to see yet in its sling; and Mr. Lydell made corresponding ones about Lady Perriman's health, lamented her accident, and rejoiced over her partial recovery.

So far, so good. Then came a suspicion of awkwardness, which, woman-like, Aubrey was first to surmount.

"The subject Mr. Robins has left us to discuss is this horrible impostor's fate, Mr. Lydell. Of course he deserves all the punishment that the law could give him; but I think that in the relief of finding him to be an impostor I really feel more disposed to reward than punish."

Then she stopped. She had begun so well, and was conscious she had ended as badly, as her fingers nervously busied themselves among Mr. Robins's red tape, and she felt the color mounting hotly to her face. Society's ease was failing.

"Your wish settles the matter," he responded, gravely. "Hughes shall be quietly dispatched from this country, and there is little fear of his troubling it again; as little fear also, I think, of his failing ere long to get the deserts he misses to-day."

A pause, during which Aubrey would give worlds for any idea that she could turn into words, and only such as she would die rather than utter came crowding into her head, while her heart throbbed *noisily* as it seemed to herself, and her eyes and fingers clung to Mr. Robins's papers.

Then Max Lydell continued—he was standing by the window, and turned his head as if to get a better view of something important in the street below—"I am thoroughly glad to have been the means of discovering and crushing that flagrant, outrageous imposture; thoroughly glad to have delivered you from the toils of such a scoundrel—such a low-minded, vulgar scamp, too. I don't know how, for even that one brief interview, you could have tolerated him in the *role* he assumed."

Something in the tone of that last sentence raised Aubrey's eyes with a flash. The sun was shining full on the handsome face opposite—the cold, dark face, with its impenetrable eyes fixed on herself in a quiet, chilling steadiness, that, alas! her own blue ones, at the mercy of their traitor heart, were no match for.

"I tell you, I cannot describe the relief it is to know that he can appear in that *role* no more," she faltered.

"Yet had he been the person he declared himself to be, you would, at whatever cost, whatever repugnance to your feelings, have gone through with the affair?"

"I could not retract my promise given to the dead,"—almost inaudibly.

He looked at her fixedly awhile longer; then turned away to say, in the restrained tone that marks an effort, "My knowledge of your father's will is almost as recent as yours of my identity; but I believe—Mr. Robins informed me—the will is so worded, is it not, that you retain the property if I decline the contract proposed?"

She bowed assent. To speak would be to suffocate.

"Then"—hurriedly, and in accents no casual hearer would recognize as Max Lydell's—"it only remains for me to restore to you, who have the indisputable right to claim it, the fortune to which I have no claim whatever; and release you at the same time from the irksome fetters you have borne so patiently for so long; and I need intrude upon you no further,"—moving slowly.

Couched in courteous language; uttered in a delicate, gentlemanly way; yet, withal, a positive rejection of herself—an unhesitating refusal to take her at any price—a scorning of gold weighted with her hand!

Aubrey felt that she had, indeed, descended to the lowest depths; that humiliation could hold nothing more bitter for her than this moment, and in the poignancy of the stab she sprung to her feet.

"Hear my voice on the subject before you so coolly conclude it, Mr. Lydell," she exclaimed, arresting his hand on the door. "I was bound by my word so unfortunately and rashly pledged—(a bond which, regretted the moment it was entered into, has never been so bitterly repented as within the last ten minutes)—to let you be the spokesman of the words I longed for power to utter. But those words have, as you say, set me free, and I can return the insult you have dared to put upon me. You shall take the money that ought to be yours! I will not have one penny of it! Do you hear? I will not!"

Though her voice was not raised one tone above the low sweetness Lydell had so often admired, she faced him, agitated and excited, nevertheless, with burning cheeks and quivering lips, and eyes that, in their passionate scorn and brightness, rose unflinchingly to his.

She faced him with hands tightly clasped to still their trembling, and he stood in wonder that grew with each syllable he heard.

"Insult, Miss Attison! I assure you nothing on earth could be further from my thoughts; and, if my words are capable of such interpretation, I humbly retract each and all. I can say no more."

"But you shall say more! You shall say that you will take back the hateful money it would kill me to keep! Take it, Mr. Lydell, I implore, I entreat!"—with her hand unconsciously grasping his arm.

His demeanor changed suddenly under the touch of those cold little fingers. His face crimsoned, then paled, and he freed himself hastily from their clasp.

"Aubrey"—and too agitated were they both to notice the involuntary utterance of her Christian name—"you have changed, or I have strangely misunderstood you. I thought wealth had an attraction for you."

"I hate it! I detest it!" she responded, with a vehemence that paused not to consider its words. "Poor, I should have been free. It is money alone that I have to thank for the hateful bonds I have borne, as you say, patiently, for so long—for the crowning humiliation I have been fated to endure at your hands today!"

"Humiliation at my hands! I tell you I would die rather than—" He checked himself with partial recovery of self-command, and a gaze into her eyes that in excitement's strength unfalteringly met it—a gaze that seemed as if it would penetrate those pure blue depths to read the very soul beyond. "Tell me just this, Aubrey," he commanded, his face lighting with a sudden flash of possibility or hope. "Answer this one question honestly, without trifling or prevarication: Was it this promise to your father, or dread of poverty, that made you throw poor George Skipworth over?"

She neither trifled nor prevaricated, nor did she attempt any honest answer; merely stared him back in the face in blank bewilderment.

"You are keeping me in torture," he said, hoarsely.

"I don't understand you in the least. I throw George Skipworth over? What was he ever to me?"

"Only a man you had promised to marry!"

Then she freed her hands, and turned in haughtiest indignation.

"Mr. Lydell, is it possible you have been thinking that of me?"

In the proud, hurt scorn he felt truth's ring; but he could not trust his feelings in this matter, and their very efforts for the mastery made him the more cautious and doubting.

"His own lips told me. My own eyes saw you with him in the park at Perriman. My own ears heard you utter some of the words that goaded him to his death. Aubrey, cannot you be truthful once? Is suffering nothing to you that you play with it thus, for the very love of deception?"

"I think you are losing your senses, Mr. Lydell," she retorted, quietly, her self-command returning as fast as his deserted him; "and so

are perhaps not accountable for the rudeness you are uttering. What Mr. Skipworth told you, or what you saw or heard, I do not know. I only know that I can assure you solemnly, as if on my oath—truthfully, as if these were the last words my lips should speak—that in this fancy of yours you wrong me most utterly. George Skipworth was never lover of mine."

"I saw you with him," he repeated.

"For a few minutes only, and as some one else's deputy."

"Whose?"

"I cannot betray another's secret," she said, proudly. "Believe me or not, as you like; it is a matter of indifference. If you doubt my word, I can descend to no further proof."

Lydell's answer was prevented by Mr. Robins's step outside, and Mr. Robins's quick glance from one to another of the clients he left for amicable discussion.

In feminine quickness Miss Attison was again her own gracious self.

"Mr. Lydell will tell you the conclusions he and I have arrived at." She turned to the lawyer smilingly. "If I stop another moment I shall lose the down-train I want most particularly to catch. Good-by, Mr. Robins. Good-by, Mr. Lydell."

And she had bowed, and was gone.

CHAPTER IX.

IN LOVE'S BONDS.

"HER ladyship is waiting tea for you, miss."

Her maid brought the message to Aubrey directly she entered the Hall, and before ten minutes had been spent in her cousin's company the girl knew it was vain to attempt to hide anything from her searching eyes and intuitive perception.

And it was some relief to tell it all, humiliating recital though it was, to so sympathizing a listener as Alberta proved herself now.

Lady Perriman's delight, unfeigned at Aubrey's first revelation, was some kind of solace to the girl for the pain of putting into words of her own the bitter humiliation that followed it so quickly, and under which her sensitive feelings were quivering.

When it was all told, my lady smiled, and drew down the hot crimson face to her own.

"I shall be able to congratulate you yet, dear—really congratulate you heartily upon your engagement, Aubrey, after all our arguments and disputes on the knotty point. But I am glad you have left me one little atonement to make for my own hideous selfishness. Now, there is the gong, darling; run away, and get dressed, and look bright."

And while Aubrey and Sir Edgar went *tete-a-tete* through the ponderous dinner, my lady wrote a little penciled note, which she gave to her maid with the order to dispatch a groom with it to Mr. Lydell's house first thing to-morrow morning.

Aubrey came in next morning from a walk to the village, and catching a glimpse of a strange horse being promenaded before the stables, and a murmur of conversation from her cousin's boudoir, imagined the doctor to be paying his daily visit, so divested herself quietly of her walking things, and went down to the drawing-room to await his departure.

By the time her patience was exhausted she heard him taking leave and coming down the stairs; but standing before the fire, with her back to the drawing-room door, she was surprised to hear his steps pause outside it, and then slowly enter.

As she turned quickly, she found herself face to face with Max Lydell.

"I am here to crave forgiveness, Miss Attison," so Lydell began. "I have just had a long conversation with Lady Perriman, and her lips have told me what my own reason would have done long ago had I not been too stubborn a fool to listen to it. How basely I wronged you in that matter of poor George Skipworth's! How grossly my unworthy, cowardly accusations insulted you yesterday! I

should not have dared to force myself into your presence again," he continued, in the same low, repressed tone, after vainly waiting for movement or response, "but for her ladyship's express stipulation that I should tell you the amends she has made you at last; and now it is presumptuous, it is hopeless, I know, to ask you to look charitably on such aggravated insolence as mine has been."

He paused, and there was no sound. His eyes, kindled and impasioned as their dark depths were, could win no glance for hope or despair, for Aubrey's auburn head was buried in her hands.

Another few moments, the clock ticked on, then Lydell's voice grew hoarse in the agony stronger than his iron will.

"Forgiveness is too much to expect. I thought so; and to offer you apologies is but a mockery. I have no right—no excuse for annoying you further; and yet I ask you to bear with me, Aubrey, a few moments longer—listen to the confession my yesterday's madness has rendered such a hopeless one. That my punishment is as bitter, as complete as even you could wish it, you shall know, for the madness of my insults was the madness of *love*—a love that, as the first of my life, will be the last—a love as strong as my life, and that means now *despair*."

Silence as his voice broke, and he strode to the window and back with an effort at control.

"To see you daily, hourly; to fight against the spell of your sweetness, and with each struggle succumb the deeper; to be haunted day and night by your face, and your voice ringing in my ears; to know you are all the world to me, and to madly declare that such you should not be; to believe you unworthy an honest man's life and love, and to feel that mine were as utterly at your mercy as my pride and will were helpless to prevent it—that has been my punishment so far, Aubrey. What it is to be is a something keener—a full knowledge of the perfection of the prize that might have been mine, and a never-failing consciousness that it is lost to me through my own cursed, conceited idiocy."

He broke off, and the next words were wistful and low, with a despair in their forced calm that rung straight to Aubrey's heart.

"I will make you the one compensation I can. I will take myself out of your sight forever, and whatever your wishes may be I swear to fulfill them."

With one last lingering look, he crossed the room, and paused at the door; and then Aubrey, extending her arms toward him, cried, almost shrieked out, "Max!"

He turned, saw her face, and the tale that it told.

Two strides, and her hands were in his.

"Aubrey, is it possible? Can you forgive?"

She raised her eyes to his—her eyes with their depths so much deeper than forgiveness, and smiled, but he hesitated still.

"Don't trifle with me, child!" in urgent passion of appeal. "I told you I knew how utterly I had wrecked the bliss I might have once dared to hope possible. Don't raise the wild tempest of thoughts of what might have been. My control is less than I fancied—my will nowhere. You offered me friendship once, Aubrey. It is friendship you mean to-day, is it not?"

She shook her head archly.

"That is for you to decide."

"My dearest!—my love!"

His arms were round her then, and the auburn head was pillow'd happily at last.

"If there be the hope—if there be the chance, tell me plainly at once. You don't know what the love is I have stifled so long. You cannot guess its power if once uncurbed. Aubrey, my love, my darling, may I give it free scope?"

Then, for answer, she raised her face, laughing in very rapture.

"And how about that candidly avowed opinion that any decent flower-girl would

make, in your eyes, a far more desirable wife than pretty Miss Attison?"

There came a perplexed memory into his mind.

"Were those my words? How, in the name of wonder—"

"Did I hear them? Mr. Lydell, let this be a warning to you to distrust Albert Hall corridors and the muffled strangers you pass."

"I have a dim remembrance now. I have been a more consummate idiot than I even knew. Are you equal to forgiving that also?"

But though the tone was penitent, the smile was confident, for the face he bent to see was nestling again on his breast.

"I have not decided yet. I rather fancy that rash, rude speech was punished in those days you found me so very unpleasant to get on with; but I should like to know, if you have no objection to tell, why you thus expressed yourself so determinedly about a young lady of whom you knew nothing?"

"I had seen you and had admired you rather more than I liked to own to myself I could admire the daughter of the man whose name I had been taught from childhood to detest as that of an underhand injurer of me and mine. Forgive the explanation, Aubrey, as you forgive that ungentlemanly, hasty speech, which was but a beginning of this end, and which I many a time would have given much to recall, though I knew not that it had fallen on any ears but those of the man whose jests provoked it, and by whom I knew it would be forgotten as soon as heard."

Then he bent lower, and whispered again.

"Aubrey, until I hear it from your lips, I shall fancy this happiness too great to be any thing but a tantalizing dream with a rude awakening in store for me. Have I gained your love?"

And she twined her arms timidly around his neck, and out from her blushes her eyes met his, true as blue.

"Max, I only learned myself yesterday how dearly, and deeply, and wholly I do love you!"

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